

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Benoy Kumar Sarkar, and the *Śukranīti*

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The towering reputation of the art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) is based not just on his prodigious output and the extraordinary range of his publications, extending from studies of crafts to learned disquisitions on comparative metaphysics, but also on the sense that he was a kind of seer.* He carried the study of the Indian temple, as was written in 1983, 'to its inner meaning, to its very reason for being'.¹ Discontent with positions taken in Coomaraswamy's *Summa*-like corpus has grown in recent years, as will be seen in the closing pages of this article, but the case for approaches less rooted in notions of a spiritual India are not new. In a 1974 treatise the Calcutta art historian Niharranjan Ray maintained that it was a misconception to believe that 'Indian culture was basically religious and spiritual in character, fundamentally idealistic and transcendental in attitude and approach' and that 'the forms of Indian art had their birth in spiritual contemplation'.² In actuality, a cogent case for a humanistic view of Indian art had been made decades earlier, by a close contemporary of Coomaraswamy. The sociologist Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1887-1949) believed that there was no difference between East and West and that the notion of a spiritual India was an implantation of colonial ideology. The two authors never directly referred to each other, but they were tied together in a curious way. For both, the *Śukranīti*, a Sanskrit treatise now thought to have been compiled in the nineteenth century, played a central role in their scholarship. Sarkar was responsible for the standard translation, and key passages formed the basis for Coomaraswamy's views concerning the production of sacred icons.

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¹ Pramod Chandra, *On the Study of Indian Art*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983, 33. A more recent survey of the historiography of Indian art is Parul Pandya Dhar, 'Introduction - A History of Art History: The Indian Context', in Parul Pandya Dhar, ed., *Indian Art History: Changing Perspectives*, New Delhi: D. K. Printworld and National Museum Institute, 2011, 1-32; available online at <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/indian-art-history.pdf> (accessed 15 July 2023).

² Niharranjan Ray, *An Approach to Indian Art*, Chandigarh: Panjab University, 1974, 13 and 14.

The first part of this article will be devoted to the formation of Coomaraswamy's thought – how the English Arts and Crafts Movement engendered views of an ideal society, which he then projected upon India. The middle section consists of close analyses of the relevant passages in the *Śukranīti* and of their interpretation by Coomaraswamy. The final section concerns the writings of Benoy Kumar Sarkar, especially his proposal for a universal grammar of art, and his indebtedness to his friend the New York artist Max Weber (1881-1961).

Ananda Coomaraswamy left Ceylon in December 1906 after nearly four years of service as Director, Mineralogical Survey. Raised in Kent by his widowed English mother following the death of his father the Ceylonese Tamil barrister Sir Mutu Coomaraswamy in 1879, he produced during the four years no less than twenty-four technical publications, adding to six resulting from earlier visits in 1900 and 1901.³ His published articles in fact ranged far and wide, British social policy being a subject of nearly equal concern. Together with his wife Ethel, a weaver and photographer, he also accumulated considerable knowledge of Sinhalese arts and crafts. This knowledge led him, at the age of twenty-nine, to embark on a new career path, one that culminated in the publication of *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art* in December 1908.⁴ This project warranted an appropriate environment, and thanks to some inherited money and Ethel's family connections (through her brother, a jewellery maker) the Coomaraswamys were soon enveloped by the Norman Chapel in Broad Camden, in Gloucestershire, which was outfitted with the printing press used by William Morris and the Kelmscott Press in the 1890s and subsequently by the Essex House Press, the publication wing of the Guild of Handicraft. The Guild, which had been established by C. R. Ashbee in London in 1887, had moved to Chipping Camden in 1902, a move of the workers, their wives, and their children, 150 in all.⁵

In an article in the *The International Studio* in 1907, Ashbee described his renovation of the Norman Chapel:

A word should be added about the metal work. This is for the most part beautiful Sinhalese craftsmanship, some of it richly damascened by native workmen. Dr. A. K. Coomaraswamy, for whom I have had the privilege of working and who now lives in the house, sent this over from Ceylon. He has also added many other splendid and beautiful Oriental treasures, and his collection of Sinhalese arts and crafts, upon a history of which he is now

³ Bibliographical information is found in James S. Crouch, *A Bibliography of Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy*, New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts [and] Manohar, 2002. For the life of Coomaraswamy, Pratapaditya Pal, *Quest for Coomaraswamy, A Life in Art*, Calgary: Bayeaux Arts, 2020. An earlier biography is Roger Lipsey, *Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, 3, His Life and Work*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.

⁴ Broad Camden: Essex House Press, 1908; Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, 2nd edition, New York: Pantheon, 1956.

⁵ Peter Davey, *Arts and Crafts Architecture*, London: Phaidon, 1995, 157.

presently engaged, is curiously fitted to the character of the building in which it is placed. It is indeed fortunate that the building is owned by one whose fine taste is so sympathetically conservative.⁶

The workers gathered around Ashbee in London and Chipping Camden - cabinetmakers, blacksmiths, silversmiths, composers, and others - were tied together by Ashbee's Socialist teachings, their solidarity strengthened by such activities in Chipping Camden as the communal singing of traditional rounds and catches.⁷ In his foreword to Coomaraswamy's *The Indian Craftsman*, Ashbee made it clear that the young scholar's writings furthered his own social aims. 'For our immediate purpose, too, the purpose of this book, the "common reason of the world", includes and defines the Indian craftsman and the Indian village community; it gives them a definite place not only in the Indian order of things, not only in the culture of the East, but in the World.'⁸

Ashbee's guild was not the only society in London inspired by William Morris (1834-96), preaching socialism, and dedicated to the design and production of handmade objects. A smaller one was the Century Guild, founded in 1882 by A. H. Murkmurdo (1851-1942), significant because it sponsored a magazine, the *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, an aesthetic object (handmade paper, wide margins, artist-designed initials, headpieces, and tailpieces) that inspired Morris's establishment of the Kelmscott Press. The Century Guild turned in the 1890s away from practical and political topics towards more intangible ones, as the Century Guild headquarters, on Fitzroy Street, became a gathering place for poets (among them the young William Butler Yeats). The Kelmscott Press, on the other hand, was a way for the aging Morris to present to the public cherished values of his own. Among his collaborators were his friend from Oxford days, the artist Edward Burne-Jones (1833-98), and a younger designer, Walter Crane (1845-1915).

The typesetting of *Mediæval Sinhalese Art* commenced in September 1907, and in the following months the Essex Press printed various slender pamphlets, including *The Deeper Meaning of the Struggle* (November 1907), *The Aims of Indian Art* (May 1908), and *The Influence of Greek on Indian Art* (July 1908). A discussion of topics addressed in these works helps situate Coomaraswamy's thought: one subject was the artist Edward Burne-Jones, another the art of Gandhara, and a third, a Sanskrit text, the Śukranīti. The Śukranīti, which will take up many of the pages that follow, brought together

⁶C. R. Ashbee, 'The "Norman Chapel"'. Buildings at Broad Camden in Gloucestershire', *The International Studio*, 128, October 1907, (289-96) 294-96.

⁷ Alan Crawford, *C. R. Ashbee: Architect, Designer & Romantic Socialist*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1985, 89. For the trades, C. R. Ashbee, *Craftsmanship in Competitive Industry*, Camden: Essex House Press, 1908, rpt. India: Pranava Press, n. d., Appendix V.

⁸ C. R. Ashbee, 'Foreword', in A. K. Coomaraswamy, *The Indian Craftsman*, London: Probstain, 1909, XIV.

Coomaraswamy, Ernest Havell (1861-1934), Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), and, independently, Benoy Kumar Sarkar.

Crosscurrents in aesthetics: from Burne-Jones to Clive Bell

'Burne-Jones almost alone amongst the artists of the modern West', wrote Coomaraswamy, 'seems to have understood art as we in India understand it.'⁹ (Coomaraswamy overlooked the fact that Lady Burne-Jones wrote of her husband that 'into India his spirit never entered'.)¹⁰ The head, thought Burne-Jones, is the 'place where I think pictures ought to come from'.¹¹ 'You see', he said at another time, 'it is these things of the soul that are real. . . the only real things in the universe.'¹² The American art critic Russell Sturgis was correct to write that the artists of the pre-Raphaelite movement, of which Burne-Jones was a second-generation member, attempted 'to express the unexpressible thoughts of poetical, philosophical and religiously inclined spirits'.¹³ The transcendental values Burne-Jones found in Mediaeval sources, in Coomaraswamy's understanding, paralleled the spiritual truths that lie behind Indian icons.

As recently as a decade previously Burne-Jones was supplying narrative designs for products of the Kelmscott Press - *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1896) - printed with the press Coomaraswamy was utilizing in the Norman Chapel.¹⁴ Buried somewhere within the Morris press might also be memories of pre-Raphaelite camaraderie and high spirits, as found in a dinner invitation Burne-Jones sent to the ceramic designer William de Morgan: 'I want you fat and merry, full of rude and coarse jesting.' The invitation also suggests that in person William Morris could be rather overbearing: 'Mr. Morris I repeat will express himself in an uncompromising manner about life generally and will brace the nerves of the flaccid.'¹⁵ Burne-Jones represented the lineage to which Coomaraswamy wished to be attached - artists who rejected the establishment heritage exemplified by Sir Joshua Reynolds, which had elevated Raphael and all those who followed in his path. They looked instead to Quattrocento Italian artists and to a more recent British mystic, William Blake. By focussing on Burne-Jones, Coomaraswamy avoided having to explicate the ideological twists that led from John Ruskin and William Morris to current thinking. He seems to have found in *Memorials of Sir Edward*

⁹ 'The Aims and Methods of Indian art' (an expanded *The Aims of Indian Art*), in Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Essays in Indian Idealism*, Colombo: Colombo Apothecaries, 1909, rpt. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2013, 25.

¹⁰ Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 2 vols., New York: Macmillan, 1906, 2: 43.

¹¹ 'Aims and Methods', 25; *Memorials*, 1: 223.

¹² 'Aims and Methods', 25; *Memorials*, 2: 300.

¹³ Russell Sturgis, *Appreciation of Pictures: a Handbook*, New York: Baker & Taylor, 1905, 254.

¹⁴ Linda Parry, ed., *William Morris*, London: Philip Wilson, 1996, 330-38.

¹⁵ A. M. W. Stirling, *William De Morgan and His Wife*, New York: Henry Holt, 1922, 74. The letter evidently was sent in 1879. Mentioned is the painting 'Annunciation' of 1878-79 (Lady Lever Gallery, Port Sunlight).

Burne-Jones of 1906 distinctions that he could borrow and then apply to an opposition between East and West. Coomaraswamy appears not to have thought much about Burne-Jones's actual artistic practice, in which portraits were an important element and in whose mythological paintings the faces of friends and family members can be recognized.¹⁶

Another element in pre-Raphaelite and Arts and Crafts aesthetics was an attitude toward the decorative in art. The artist Walter Crane contrasted the decorative with the pictorial. (For the French aesthete Eugène Véron, whose treatise appeared in English in 1879, the contrast was with the expressive.)¹⁷ Crane - an heir to the pre-Raphaelite tradition - had provided tapestry designs to William Morris in 1883, prior to his work on *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, a Kelmscott Press publication of 1894. In *The Claims of Decorative Art* of 1892, Crane stressed the interdependence of pictorial and decorative art: 'where decorative or applied art is in a wholesome condition good pictorial or dramatic art will follow.'¹⁸ Criteria used to make judgements in the decorative arts could also be applied to pictorial art: in the Parthenon marbles, 'the eye is first charmed and won over by the rhythmical sweep and play of line, the masterly counterbalance of curve, . . . and what must have been the triumphant combination in a harmonious whole.'¹⁹ At one point, Crane took notice of Véron's *Aesthetics*. Véron maintained there was a gulf between 'expressive' and decorative art. 'As if all good art was not expressive!' Crane objected. But he agreed that the gulf was broadening: 'everything is being sacrificed to the attainment of fact in some form or other [thinking, probably, of Impressionism], and painting has almost ceased to be an art of design.'²⁰

Crane tended not to read meanings into decorative art. A division of ornamental styles into 'symbolic' and 'aesthetic' was of long standing (found in Ralph Wornum's 1855 *Analysis of Ornament*, for instance), but at the end of the nineteenth century, it was common for Arts and Crafts practitioners to find symbols in decorative ornament.²¹ Although Ashbee did not write about symbolism, Roger Fry, who lectured at the Guild of Handicraft in London in the 1890s, found the students 'too much absorbed in the hidden meanings of things to trouble about correct drawing'.²² Symbols were in the air; William Butler Yeats believed, according to an essay of 1900, that the symbolism of

¹⁶ See for instance the captions in Penelope Fitzgerald, *Edward Burne-Jones*, Phoenix Mill: Sutton, 1997, between 128 and 129.

¹⁷ Eugène Véron, *Aesthetics*, trans. W. H. Armstrong, London: Chapman & Hall and Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1879. On line at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/g/genpub/AAX2765.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext> (accessed 6 April 2022).

¹⁸ Walter Crane, *The Claims of Decorative Art*, London: Lawrence and Bullen 1892, 2.

¹⁹ Crane, *Claims*, 25.

²⁰ Crane, *Claims*, 128-30.

²¹ Ralph N. Wornum, *Analysis of Ornament: the Characteristic of Styles*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1877, 1.

²² Quoted, Crawford, C. R. *Ashbee*, 221-22.

Shelley's poetry 'loses something of its appearance of idle phantasy when I remember that these are ancient symbols, and still come to visionaries in their dreams'.²³

Coomaraswamy wrote in 1908 that 'Every real pattern has a long ancestry and a story to tell. For those who can read its language, even the most strictly decorative art has complex and symbolical associations. . . .'²⁴

Meanwhile, Véron's concept of expressive art became, unexpectedly, a way of dividing East and West. The writer responsible was Lionel de Fonseka (b. 1889), a Sinhalese student in London, whose *On the Truth of Decorative Art: a Dialogue Between an Oriental and an Occidental* was published in 1912.²⁵ The author expressed his indebtedness to Coomaraswamy in a letter:

127. Cheyne Walk

Chelsea SW

14. Aug 1912

Dear Sir

I read your most kind and encouraging letter with a high degree of pleasure and pride. I had intended to send you a copy of the 'Truth of Decorative Art', and obtained your address for that purpose, but mislaid it, and being worried about an exam, I overlooked the matter. I trust you will be good enough to accept the copy I am sending you now. It was my duty to send you one first because you are in many ways responsible for the book. My interest in the subject began with my reading of your book on Mediaeval Sinhalese art, and it was your essays in National Idealism that moved me to write my dialogue. You will probably have noticed in reading the book to what extent I am indebted to you for the ideas to which I tried to give expression -. I am only one of many Ceylon students now in England who have been greatly influenced by your writings.

Some very favourable reviews have appeared in the English Press, though many papers to which I sent copies have not noticed it yet.

²³ W. B. Yeats, 'The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry', in George Bornstein and Richard J. Finneran, eds., *Early Essays*, The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume 4, New York: Scribner, 2007, (51-72) 68.

²⁴ *The Aims of Indian Art*, Broad Camden: Essex Press, 1908, 16. Nevertheless Coomaraswamy distinguished between 'racial' and 'social' factors. 'The one great distinction of Mughal from Hindu art is not so much racial as social; the former is an art of courts and connoisseurs, owing much to individual patronage, the latter belongs as much to the folk as to the kings.' *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon*, London and Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1913, vi.

²⁵ London: Greening & Co., 1912, 2nd ed., London: A. C. Fifield, 1913.

My sincere thanks to you for your letter, & the review you have been good enough to write for the Indian paper. Though I hardly dare to think that the book merits the high commendation you have given it.

Believe me

Yours sincerely

Lionel de Fonseka²⁶

De Fonseka's book is disconcerting because although his attack on the West is filled with names (among the moderns, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Thomas Hardy, Arthur Symons, Walter Pater, and Max Nordau), his elevation of the East remains rather vague. According to Véron's *Aesthetics*, decorative art (which included much representative art and was not restricted to ornament), 'has nothing in view', 'beyond the peculiar delight caused by the sight of beautiful objects'.²⁷ Expressive art, on the other hand, 'traces the moral life'.²⁸ Many of the works of Rubens 'enchant the eye by glorious displays of colour' and so can be considered decorative, 'but moral expression and epic meaning' are also present. The existence of lively and sincere emotion constitutes 'both the superiority and the distinguishing feature of expressive art'.²⁹ The artist also introduces 'his own sensibility, imagination, and intelligence'.³⁰ Véron's twofold scheme persisted into the twentieth century, when, with the rise of abstract art, art critics were confronted by the need to distinguish non-figurative paintings that trace the moral life from those that are merely decorative.

For De Fonseka, on the other hand, *decorative* was not a term of opprobrium. He took Véron's opposition and bent it to his own purposes. Modern Western art is expressive; Asian art is intrinsically decorative. The West produces 'the obscene work of art, one where an artist lays bare his soul'. The 'art of the East has always been anonymous and impersonal.'³¹ True, the Eastern artist, before he makes a religious image, 'retires into solitude and meditation', but the outcome is 'dedicated to the service of religion', not a result of expression.³²

Coomaraswamy's review of *On the Truth of Decorative Art* appeared in Madras in *Hindu* (2 September 1912). He wrote that 'it is surely the best general criticism of modern Western civilization, and diagnosis of our modern Indian incoherence, which

²⁶ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy Papers (C0038), Princeton University Library, Box 46, Folder 6. Coomaraswamy's review was published in *Hindu* [Madras], 2 Sept. 1912; see Crouch, *Bibliography*, 197.

²⁷ Eugène Véron, 'Art as Emotional Expression', in Peyton E. Richter, *Perspectives in Aesthetics Plato to Camus*, New York: Odyssey, 1967, (221-232) 231.

²⁸ Véron, 'Art', 231.

²⁹ Véron, *Aesthetics* (see n. 17), 116.

³⁰ Véron, *Aesthetics*, 127.

³¹ De Fonseka, *On the Truth* (1913 ed.), 56, 80.

³² De Fonseka, *On the Truth*, 117.

any of us has yet written.’³³ The review was headed ‘Art for Life’s Sake’, an expression found in *On the Truth*. Between ‘Art for art’s sake’ and ‘Art for morality’s sake’, both of which can be considered ‘perversions’, wrote de Fonseka, there is a middle way: ‘Briefly, art for decoration’s sake otherwise art for life’s sake. Art holds the same place in human life as the eye-brows do in the human face. The eye-brow is decorative. It is there not for its own sake, but for the sake of the face, and it is there because nature wills it so.’³⁴

On the Truth of Decorative Art faded into obscurity. De Fonseca lived in continental Europe for ten years and after returning to Ceylon served as a barrister.³⁵ His spiritual home, it appears, was not in the Buddhist religion but in Roman Catholicism, as hinted in passages in *On the Truth*: the West’s ‘pure’ music is in fact corrupt, and the music that has remained pure is decorative and necessary, ‘as accompaniment to the religious services of the Catholic Church for instance’.³⁶

Coomaraswamy’s full-scale embrace of de Fonseca’s views in 1912 constitutes a sort of crystallisation of his own position, one that would set himself up in opposition to twentieth-century Western aesthetics. Although in his far-ranging review of Clive Bell’s *Art* in the London periodical *New Age* (1914) he downplayed his intellectual homage to the pre-Raphaelite movement, not mentioning Burne-Jones and acknowledging only that it was important because it represented a break with the academic tradition, it is also clear that he was not in sympathy with Bell’s formalist approach.³⁷ This review could be considered Coomaraswamy’s last engagement with mainstream art criticism; he subsequently became for a period almost entirely occupied with the scholarship of Indian art, and when he emerged the dialogues he established were primarily with fringe figures in the study of comparative religion. Bell’s *Art* is the text that put ‘significant form’ on the map. Coomaraswamy more or less interpreted it as Beauty and saw it in many but not all of the same places as Bell. The recent re-appearance of significant form, for Bell, was due to Paul Cézanne, and was the product of a mind engaging with nature, as Cézanne ‘set himself to create the forms that would express the emotion that he felt for what he had learnt to see’.³⁸ Coomaraswamy was willing to acknowledge only that many artists had been inspired by Cézanne and that post-Impressionism, in general, pointed the way to the future, because it incorporated many Asian qualities (the artists and the qualities remaining unidentified). He was not, in fact, a sympathetic reader. The review closed by leaving Bell’s book far behind, in a plea that all men should be artists and that all machinery should be abolished. Clive

³³ Crouch, *Bibliography*, 197.

³⁴ De Fonseka, *On the Truth*, 44.

³⁵ <https://defonseka.com/front-page/the-articles/people/lionel-de-fonseka/>, accessed 15 April 2022.

³⁶ De Fonseka, *On the Truth*, 23.

³⁷ A. K. Coomaraswamy, ‘Modern Art Criticism’, *New Age* n. s. 14: 24, 16 April 1914, 761-63. Accessible on line through the Modernist Journals Project.

³⁸ Clive Bell, *Art*, New York: Stokes, [1914], 209.

Bell, meanwhile, expressed his views about the art of the pre-Raphaelites in a book published in 1929. None of these painters, he wrote, understood the obligation 'to create forms which have an emotional significance of their own'.³⁹

Gandhara

If pre-Raphaelite and Arts and Crafts Movement thinking had any bearing on attitudes toward the Indian art of Gandhara, it would lie in a tendency towards a racial essentialism. The craftsmen singing old-English rounds and catches in Chipping Camden were being true to their nature, and if British adoption of Italian High Renaissance styles represented a loss of authenticity, then surely the Mediterranean borrowings of Gandharan sculpture did too.

Gloucestershire was one centre of activity in the early 1900s, Calcutta another. Whether Coomaraswamy visited Calcutta in the first half of 1907 is unfortunately unresolved.⁴⁰ In Calcutta a burning question was the direction contemporary art should take.⁴¹ A commanding figure was Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), who had burst on the world scene as a charismatic presence at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893 (and who met Coomaraswamy in Ceylon in 1899).⁴² "I am in every religion", declared the god Krishna, Vivekananda informed his audience in Chicago, "as the thread through a string of pearls." "It is reserved for America to proclaim to all quarters of the globe that the lord is in every religion."⁴³ Along similar lines, his disciple Sister Nivedita wrote of Indian thought as a 'university of spiritual culture'.⁴⁴

Sister Nivedita (Margaret E. Noble, 1867-1911) encountered Vivekananda first in London in November 1895, a life-changing experience that led to her departure for India and arrival in Calcutta in January 1898. The following March she became 'Sister Nivedita', a probationer in the Order of Ramakrishna. Vivekananda and Sister Nivedita formed a close bond, and their discussions ranged over cultural as well as spiritual topics. At the Congress of the History of Religions in Paris in 1900, Vivekananda

³⁹ Clive Bell, *Landmarks in Nineteenth-Century Painting*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927, 109.

⁴⁰ Pal, *Quest for Coomaraswamy*, 64, 66-67, 75. The Coomaraswamys appear to have been in India for more than three months, as a lecture was presented in Madras in May 1907 (Crouch, *Bibliography*, 169). In Broad Camden, before his return to India early in 1909, Coomaraswamy showed Abanindranath Tagore drawings in his possession to William Rothenstein. See William Rothenstein, *Men and Memories*, 2 volumes in one, New York: Tudor, [1937]), 2: 231. But these drawings need not have come into Coomaraswamy's possession as a result of a visit to Calcutta.

⁴¹ Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*, Cambridge: University Press, 1994; Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art. Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920*, Cambridge: University Press, 1992; Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories. Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

⁴² Pal, *Quest*, 39.

⁴³ Swami Vivekananda, 'Hinduism', in John Henry Barrows, *The World's Parliament of Religions*, 2 vols., Chicago: Parliament Publishing Company, 1893, (2: 968-978) 2: 976.

⁴⁴ Sister Nivedita, *The Web of Indian Life*, [1917] rpt. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2017, 186.

addressed one of these topics - that it was important to understand that the soul of Indian art had never been overshadowed by Greek influence.⁴⁵ Sister Nivedita was hardly less involved with Ernest Binfield Havell (1861-1934), Principal of the Calcutta School of Art, 1896-1906, and the budding artist Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), a cousin of the writer Rabindranath (1861-1941). According to Sister Nivedita's biographer Lizelle Reymond, Havell complained to her, 'I can teach a man to draw and paint, but I cannot make him an artist or a genius. . . .'⁴⁶ Nivedita's response was, 'Fool! But I can!' Nivedita, granddaughter of one clergyman (Wesleyan, or Methodist, in Ireland) and daughter of another (Congregationalist, in England), had before her departure run a kindergarten and a Ruskin School in Wimbledon. One of her instructors was the pioneering art pedagogue Ebenezer Cooke. Cooke, who had attended Ruskin's Drawing Class at Working Men's College in 1855, subsequently taught at a Froebel School, providing kindergarten instruction according to the principles of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852). In 1895 Cooke became responsible for a new national system of elementary art instruction; instead of depending on straight lines, as in Froebel's teaching, it substituted the practice of drawing ovals, which Cooke viewed as an organic development from a child's natural movements.⁴⁷ (Ashbee, it might be pointed out, did not approve of kindergartens - they cultivated self-expression - and maintained that all crafts instruction should take place in the workshop.)⁴⁸ Nivedita herself was so familiar with Froebel's teachings that in July 1903 she wrote a long letter to an official in Calcutta explaining how Froebel's eight 'gifts' could be taught, using local substitutes for Froebel's ball and blocks.⁴⁹ No wonder, then, that she felt confident to nurture Abanindranath Tagore, who according to Reymond brought her several drawings before producing one that satisfied her. Havell was so pleased with Tagore's work that he wrote an article featuring it for the October 1902 issue of *The Studio* in London.⁵⁰ Tagore, he wrote, had escaped 'the dreary mental *pabulum*' that characterized the hitherto prevalent course of Western academic instruction, had found inspiration in Moghul miniature painting, and gave his works 'a sincere Indian feeling'.⁵¹

If Coomaraswamy did visit Calcutta in the first months of 1907, he would not have met Havell, who had returned to England in 1906, but he would have encountered Sister Nivedita and Abanindranath. It is hard to believe that the Coomaraswamys'

⁴⁵ Bhupendranatha Datta, *Swami Vivekananda, Patriot-prophet. A Study*, Calcutta: Nababharat, 1954, 314-315, referring to Vivekananda, *Works*, vol. 5, 344-362.

⁴⁶ Lizelle Reymond, *The Dedicated: A Biography of Nivedita*, Madras: Samata Books, 1985 [orig. French ed., 1953], 333.

⁴⁷ For Cooke, Gordon Sutton, *Artisan or Artist?*, Oxford and New York: Pergamon, 1967, 137-159.

⁴⁸ C. R. Ashbee, *Should We Stop Teaching Art*, London: Batsford, 1911.

⁴⁹ *Letters of Sister Nivedita*, ed. Sankari Prasad Basu, vol. 2, 1903-1911, Calcutta Nababharat 1982, 574-578 (accessed through Google Books).

⁵⁰ E. B. Havell, 'Some Notes on Indian Pictorial Art', *The Studio: An Illustrated Magazine of Fine & Applied Art*, 27: 115 (October 1902), 25-33.

⁵¹ Havell, 'Some Notes', 30.

itinerary did not include Calcutta, despite the absence of evidence. Sister Nivedita, under close watch because of her Nationalist activities, left Calcutta for England on 15 August 1907, and among the many places she gave lectures in 1908 was Broad Camden.⁵² Production of Coomaraswamy's seven-page booklet *The Influence of Greek on Indian Art*, based on a paper given at an international conference in Copenhagen in August 1908, was completed on 2 October 1908 by the Essex House Press, in an edition of fifty copies. 'It is the concentration of attention upon the effeminate and artistically unimportant work of the Gandhāra school that has given undue prominence to the Greek influence', Coomaraswamy complained.⁵³ He also declared, 'Indian art is essentially transcendental.' Coomaraswamy acknowledged that his initial positive reaction to Grünwedel's *Buddhist Art in India* (1901), published when he was still in Ceylon, was to be regretted.⁵⁴ Grünwedel had written that the 'Apollo-type of the Alexandrine period' was 'used as a basis for the Buddha-head' and 'that the Gāndhāra period was really the mother of all later Buddhist (as well as Brāhmanical) creations in art'.⁵⁵

By 1908, eight years had passed since Swami Vivekananda's address in Paris. In the meantime, a somewhat different view had been presented by Kakuzo Okakura (1862-1913), in *The Ideals of the East, With Special Reference to the Art of Japan*, published in London in 1903. Okakura dealt with the problem of Mediterranean influence by denying it existed altogether. In late 1901, Okakura arrived from Japan in Calcutta in the company of Sister Nivedita's close friend Josephine MacLeod. The three went on a pilgrimage to Bodhgaya, and in the early months of 1902 Sister Nivedita was assisting Okakura in the rewriting of *The Ideals of the East*.⁵⁶ She also wrote a preface to the book. Okakura maintained that once Gandharan sculpture has been studied more fully it will be understood as more Chinese than Greek.⁵⁷ Okakura was apparently thinking in historical terms, baffled because of Kushan origins in Central Asia (and therefore 'China') and the chronological and geographical distance of Hellenistic Greece.

Ernest Havell's *Indian Sculpture and Painting* appeared in January 1908, and there he stated that the Gandharan Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were 'soulless puppets, debased types of the Greek and Roman pantheon, posing uncomfortably in the attitudes of Indian asceticism'; they were tainted by commercialism and by insincerity

⁵² Lipsey, *His Life and Work*, 46.

⁵³ A. K. Coomaraswamy, *The Influence of Greek on Indian Art*, Broad Camden: Essex House Press 1908, 1. This paper also forms an appendix in Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, 2nd ed., 256-261.

⁵⁴ *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, 256. Coomaraswamy's review of Grünwedel had appeared in 1906; Crouch, *Bibliography*, 160.

⁵⁵ Albert Grünwedel, revised and enlarged by Jas. Burgess, *Buddhist Art in India*, London 1901, rpt. Santiago de Compostela and London: Susil Gupta, 1965, 164 and 147.

⁵⁶ Reymond, *The Dedicated*, 243-44, 267.

⁵⁷ Kakuzo Okakura, *The Ideals of the East with Special Reference to the Art of Japan*, Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo: Tuttle 1970, 77-78.

(because created by Court patronage rather than ‘strong national feeling’).⁵⁸ Alfred Foucher dismissed such statements as due to either the taste of aestheticians or the rancour of nationalists (for which he was rebuked more than once by Coomaraswamy).⁵⁹ What was new in Coomaraswamy’s October 1908 view was that the sculptures of Gandhara were ‘effeminate’. It is not clear whether he had in mind a small number of works or the entire body of Gandharan sculpture. It could also be asked if Coomaraswamy’s choice of term was a deliberate echo of longstanding British characterizations of their colonial Indian subjects as effeminate.⁶⁰

Variations of these views appeared subsequently. Sister Nivedita (in her essay ‘The Ancient Abbey of Ajanta’) asked how anyone conversant with the immeasurable detachment of the Buddha could ‘take the smart military-looking young men there displayed, with their moustaches carefully trimmed to the utmost point of nicety. . . as satisfying presentiments’.⁶¹ Finally, a scholar of the next generation, Stella Kramrisch, lecturer in art history in Calcutta, wrote in 1933 that Gandharan sculpture was distinguished by ‘weary eclecticism’.⁶² She seems to have been echoing the judgement of Havell: the sculptures were the product of a kind of false consciousness. Havell’s ‘strong national feeling’ was for Kramrisch the *Volkgeist* (spirit of the people) of Johann Friedrich Herder (1744-1803), which she had absorbed as a student in Vienna. (The American art historian Meyer Schapiro suggested as an English equivalent ‘aboriginal psychological predisposition.’⁶³ Another term once widespread but not now in fashion is *genius*.) Coomaraswamy used the words ‘race conceptions’, ‘race mind’, ‘race-memory’, and ‘race-art.’⁶⁴

If, then, Gandharan art was inauthentic, it was important to identify what might be considered authentic – to bore into the ‘race mind’, to reveal not only an artistic style

⁵⁸ E. B. Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting: Illustrated by Typical Masterpieces with an Explanation of Their Motives and Ideals*, London: John Murray, 1908, 42-43.

⁵⁹ Alfred Foucher, ‘L’origine grecque de l’image du Bouddha’, in *Conférences faites au Musée Guimet*, Annales du Musée Guimet, Bibliothèque de vulgarisation, vols. 38-39, Chalon-sur Saône: Bertrand, 1912, 271. Ananda Coomaraswamy, ‘Buddhist Primitives’, in *The Dance of Śiva: Fourteen Indian Essays*, New York: The Sunwise Turn, 1924, 52 and Coomaraswamy, ‘The Origin of the Buddha Image’, *Art Bulletin* 9, 1927: (287-328) 287-88.

⁶⁰ For this theme, Sugata Ray, ‘The ‘Effeminate’ Buddha, the Yogic Male Body, and the Ecologies of Art History in Colonial India’, *Art History* 38: 5 (November 2015): 916-939.

⁶¹ Sister Nivedita, *Footfalls of Indian History* [1915], rpt. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2019, 108. (For Coomaraswamy’s review of this book, Crouch, *Bibliography*, 209.)

⁶² St. Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture*, Calcutta: Y. M. C. A. and London: Oxford University Press, 1933, 40.

⁶³ Meyer Schapiro, ‘The New Viennese School (1936)’, in Christopher S. Wood, *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s*, New York: Zone Books, 2003, (453-485) 463. For Kramrisch’s training in Vienna, Barbara Stoler Miller, *Exploring India’s Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983, 5-8.

⁶⁴ Coomaraswamy, *The Aims of Indian Art*, 15, 16, 20.

but the mental activities that lie behind it. Perhaps a text could be identified that would disclose the thought processes that generate the art.

The *Śukranīti*

In 1880, the German scholar Gustav Oppert published a book with the long title *On the Weapons, Army Organisation, and Political Maxims of the Ancient Hindus, with Special Reference to Gunpowder and Firearms*.⁶⁵ The Indian *nīti* is a treatise on statecraft, and the one by the sage Śukra opens with the chapter 'The Duties of Princes' and ends with a miscellaneous chapter, the last section of which is devoted to military organization. This section, with its accounts of small and large firearms, engaged Oppert, and he translated it in its entirety. For Oppert the antiquity of the *Śukranīti* was certain. In addition to the many parallel passages that occur in the *Mahābhārata*, 'The language is simple, terse, and antiquated, and in many instances the age of the work manifests itself in this respect.'⁶⁶ In Oppert's view it was India that was the home of gunpowder and firearms.

Oppert's edition of the entire Sanskrit text of the *Śukranīti* appeared in 1882, and in 1885 a different edition of the text was published in Calcutta.⁶⁷ A number of vernacular translations were made as well: Marathi (1876); Bengali (1885); Hindi (1889); and Gujarati (1893).⁶⁸ An English translation commenced in 1907, undertaken by the National Council of Education, Bengal, and sections came out in 1911-13, with the complete translation, under the name of Benoy Kumar Sarkar, appearing in 1914.⁶⁹ In a separately published analysis of the text Sarkar pointed out that when the *Śukranīti* maintained that the killing of a cow was a ground for war this echoed the practice of the seventeenth-century Maratha ruler Śivāji the Great.⁷⁰ In 1937, he expanded the linkages, as did Lallanji Gopal in an article of 1962.⁷¹ Gopal also made a compelling case

⁶⁵ Gustav Oppert, *On the Weapons, Army Organisation, and Political Maxims of the Ancient Hindus, with Special Reference to Gunpowder and Firearms*, Madras: Higginbotham & Co. and London: Trübner & Co., 1880.

⁶⁶ Oppert, *On the Weapons*, 43.

⁶⁷ Gustav Oppert, ed. *Śukranītisāra*, vol. 1, *Text, Variæ Lectiones, &c.*, Madras: Government Press, 1882. Accessible on line at <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.406179> (accessed 10 April 2022).

⁶⁸ Lallanji Gopal, 'The "Śukranīti" - a Nineteenth-century Text', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 25, 1962, (524-556) 555.

⁶⁹ Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *The Śukranīti*, Sacred Books of the Hindus, 13, Allahabad: Indian Press, 1914; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1974.

⁷⁰ Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *The Positive Background of Hindu Sociology Book I. - Non-Political*, Sacred Books of the Hindus, vol. 16, Allahabad: Indian Press, 1914; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1974, 259.

⁷¹ Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *The Positive Background of Hindu Sociology*, Sacred Books of the Hindus, vol. 32, Allahabad: Panini Office 1937, 497-507, 607 and Gopal, 'The "Śukranīti"', 537-540. Sarkar's 1937 publication is entirely different from *Positive Background* 1914, and *Positive*

that numerous policies and regulations - in regard to game laws, the duties of an innkeeper, qualifications for promotions, budgeting, the importance of written documents, and much else - reflected promulgations of the British East India Company in 1808, 1812, 1828, and other years. The *Śukranīti*, he wrote in conclusion, should be considered an updated classical treatise compiled in the nineteenth century, possibly in Baroda, a Maratha state.

Before a complete translation became available, three writers in contact with each other, E. B. Havell, Abanindranath Tagore, and Ananda Coomaraswamy, drew on short sections of the *Śukranīti* to form characterizations of the traditional view of image-making in India. The themes that were most important to Coomaraswamy, especially, were the relationship of the practice of meditation to the production of an icon and the place of actual observation in the creative process. Coomaraswamy's resulting views raise questions of two sorts: whether the *Śukranīti* and other texts declare that the artist should meditate on or merely recollect a mental image; and whether such an act applies to the production of all art or just to the making of religious icons. The focus here will be on a single three-line passage in the *Śukranīti*, which will first be quoted and then placed in the context of the text as a whole. The Sanskrit text is from Oppert's edition; Sarkar's translation is the one that appeared in 1914. Coomaraswamy only published a translation much later in his career, in 1932 and 1934, but it does not reflect any substantive change in the views first expressed in 1908.⁷² The words are taken from the 1934 publication.

Śukranīti IV.4.147 (this is the line number, used in Sarkar's translation, not the stanza number). *Dhyānayogasya saṃsiddhyai pratimālakṣaṇam smṛtam*

Sarkar 1914. 'The characteristic of an image is its power of helping-forward contemplation and *yoga*.'⁷³

Coomaraswamy 1934. 'It is for the successful accomplishment of this practice (*yoga*) of visual-formulation (*dhyāna*) that the lineaments (*lakṣaṇa*) of images are prescribed.'

Śukranīti IV.4.148. *Pratimākārako marttyo yathādhyānarato bhavet*

Background of Hindu Sociology Book II. Political, Sacred Books of the Hindus, vol. 25, Allahabad 1921. Gopal apparently didn't realize that the 1937 publication was a new one.

⁷² The translation was published twice, as 'Aesthetic of the *Śukranītisāra*' in *Études d'orientalisme, publiées par le Musée Guimet à la mémoire de Raymonde Linossier*, Paris: E. Leroux 1932, 165-68, and, with the same title, in *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1934; rpt. New York: Dover 1956, 113-17.

⁷³ Sarkar, *Śukranīti*, 167-168. Sarkar adds in a footnote, 'Worship of images is here mentioned as only a means to an end. The image is the concrete embodiment of the divinity and helps the mind to fix itself on it by meditation.'

Sarkar 1914. 'The human maker of images should therefore be meditative.'

Coomaraswamy 1934. 'The human-imager (*pratimākāra*) should be expert in this visual-contemplation.'

Śukranīti IV.4.149. *tathā nānyena mārgeṇa pratyakṣeṇāpi vā khalu*

Sarkar 1914. 'Besides meditation there is no other way of knowing the character of an image - even direct observation (is of no use).'

Coomaraswamy 1934. 'since this, and in no other way, and verily not by direct observation (*pratyakṣa*), (can the end be achieved).'

This verse precedes a long section (lines 167-412, the end of the chapter) devoted primarily to iconometry. This section constitutes the *pratimālakṣaṇa* of line 147, the rules for image making. The image proportions are set out in units of *tāla* (feet, roughly) and digits (*aṅgula*, twelve to the *tāla*). Images can range in height from seven to sixteen *tāla*, and in the case of a nine-*tāla* image, the distance from the throat to the heart, for instance, is one *tāla* (line 189).⁷⁴ Only at a single point are there mentions of metaphoric names for body parts (line 223): a nose can be either like the beak of a bird or like a flower – instances of a usage established centuries previously and quite possibly kept alive in workshop practice. A much older text, datable to about the fourth century and preserved only in Tibetan (the *Citralakṣaṇa* of Nagnajit), has equally precise iconometric rules but many more names for the signs for body parts - for instance, bamboo-bow eyes, fish-belly eyes, lotus-petal eyes, and cowrie-shell eyes.⁷⁵ One has to imagine the apprentice internalizing the skill to produce the various types of eyes on command.

Besides *pratimālakṣaṇam*, there are four terms in line 147 (*Dhyānayogasya saṃsiddhyai pratimālakṣaṇam smṛtam*) to deal with.⁷⁶ *Smṛtam*: the *lakṣaṇa* is recollected, *smṛtam* indicating that its source is Tradition (*smṛti*) rather than Revelation (*śruti*). Tradition can be considered as 'prescribed' (Coomaraswamy) or merely as a fact of existence (Sarkar's 'is'). *Saṃsiddhyai*: the outcome of the realization is a *saṃsiddhyai*, in the dative case, a 'successful accomplishment' (Coomaraswamy; Sarkar's 'power of helping forward' might have come from a different manuscript reading). Finally, there is a crucial term at the beginning of the line, *dhyānayogasya*. The accomplishment is of

⁷⁴ For the proportions as related to those in other texts, Isabella Nardi, *The Theory of Citrasutras in Indian Painting: a Critical Re-evaluation of Their Uses and Interpretations*, London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2006, 71.

⁷⁵ B. N. Goswamy and A. L. Dahmen-Dallapiccola, trans., *Early Document of Indian Art: the Citralakṣaṇa of Nagnajit*, Delhi: Mahohar 1976, 84. For a discussion of body-part names, Hiram W. Woodward, Jr., *Such an Awakening: Indian Sculpture from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*, [Burlington, Vermont:] Robert Hull Fleming Museum, University of Vermont, 1984, 10. For eyes, see also Nardi, *Theory of Citrasutras*, 48-51.

⁷⁶ I am grateful for the help of Phillip Scott Ellis Green (email messages, 2017-18) in analyzing parts of the passage.

dhyānayoga; for Sarkar, a coordinate compound, contemplation *and* yoga; for Coomaraswamy, 'a practice (*yoga*) of visual-formulation (*dhyāna*). Full awareness of the rules (the *lakṣaṇa*) leads to a visual-formulation (surely *visualisation* would suffice).

The term *dhyāna* appears again in line 148, without *yoga*. There is a difference of interpretation, Sarkar and Coomaraswamy, with Coomaraswamy wanting to push in a certain direction, toward the requirement that a sculptor visualise the deity in an act of yogic concentration before commencing his work. That is probably what the words were originally taken to mean, but they don't require that understanding. Various types of yoga are described in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, among them, in chap. XVIII, *dhyānayoga*, meditation yoga, defined as 'taking refuge in dispassion' (XVIII.52-53).⁷⁷ The yoga exercises in chap. VI have been considered *dhyānayoga* as well, among them 'fixing the gaze on the tip of the nose' (VI.13).⁷⁸ In a later text (second half of the first millennium), the *Īśvaragītā*, the meditator initially fixes his gaze on the tip of his nose and then commences to 'fearlessly and calmly turn away from the world, which is made of delusion, and visualise the deity, the Supreme Lord, situated in his self'.⁷⁹ Visualise here is *cintayet*, 'thinks on'; in one translation, 'contemplate'.⁸⁰ In Tantric texts other terms appear, usually just translated as 'visualise'; the chief one is probably *bhāvanā*, which, in the words of André Padoux, is 'the intense creative meditation that causes to appear to the mind vivid images with which the meditator becomes identified'.⁸¹ In various derivatives *bhāvanā* appears frequently in the 12th-century *Vajravārāhi Sādhana* of Umāpatideva, in which an entire mandala is visualised.⁸²

Therefore, when Coomaraswamy translated *dhyāna* as 'visual-formulation', he was imposing a narrower understanding of the text than the text strictly allows. Coomaraswamy's interpretation was more or less consistent, from 1908 until 1934, despite differences in terminology. If it was some other text that made him so certain in his views, that text has not been identified. The *Citrasūtra* (scripture on painting) of the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, an older (500-900 CE) and far more authoritative work, would be a prime candidate, but the Sanskrit text was not published until 1912 (in Bombay), and the first English translation (by Stella Kramrisch) appeared in 1924. Still, what it says would appear to support Coomaraswamy's understanding: the artist 'should be dressed in white garments, should face the east, meditate upon his deity, and he may begin to paint'. But even here, the term used, *devatādhyāyī* (40.13a; *ā-dhyai*, 'to meditate

⁷⁷ James Mallinson and Mark Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, Milton Keynes: Penguin Books, 2017, 24.

⁷⁸ *Om Śrīmad Bhagavat Gītā*, Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1973, 288.

⁷⁹ *Īśvaragītā* 53-54: Mallinson and Singleton, *Roots*, 312; *The Kūrma Purāṇa (with English Translation)* [of which the *Īśvaragītā* is a section], ed. Sri Anand Swarup Gupta, Varanasi: All-India Kashi Raj Trust, 1972, 334.

⁸⁰ Kashi Raj Trust translation, 334.

⁸¹ André Padoux, *Vāc: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras*, trans. Jacques Gontier, Delhi: Sri Satguru, 1992, 413.

⁸² Elizabeth English, *Vajrayoginī: Her Visualizations, Rituals, & Forms*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002.

on'), may in fact allow a range of understandings, from simply 'imagine' to 'enter a trance of identification with'.⁸³

The Śukranīti goes on (line 148) to say that the image-maker should be *dhyānarata* - simply 'meditative' for Sarkar, and 'expert in this visual-contemplation' for Coomaraswamy. It might be, however, that *-rata* should be understood as meaning 'delighting in' or 'enamoured of'. It is a statement, that is to say, about the image-maker's character rather than about his proficiency. Finally (line 149), there is 'no other way', no other way than *dhyāna*, implying that in lines 147 and 148 visualization is indeed the most important aspect of *dhyāna*. 'Direct observation' (*prati-akṣa*, 'before the eye') is not a viable alternative.

More may eventually be learned about the interactions among the involved writers - Havell, Coomaraswamy, Abanindranath Tagore, and, probably, Sister Nivedita - that led to the elevation of the Śukranīti and the certainty concerning its interpretation. The first English-language reference appeared in Havell's *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, and there Havell wrote in his preface of January 1908, 'My friend and colleague, Mr. A^o N^o Tagore. . . has given me valuable knowledge of Sanskrit literature.'⁸⁴ Copies of letters from Tagore to Havell, beginning in July 1907, have been preserved at Santiniketan.⁸⁵

This is what Havell wrote in *Indian Sculpture and Painting*:

But the orthodox Hindu teaching had always maintained that it was irreverent and illogical to found artistic ideals of the Divine upon any strictly human or natural prototype. 'The artist', says Sukracharya, 'should attain to the images of the gods by means of spiritual contemplation only. The spiritual vision is the best and truest standard for him. He should depend on it, and not at all upon the visible objects perceived by external senses. It is always commendable for the artist to draw the images of the god. To make human figures is bad, and even irreligious. It is far better to present the figure of a god, though it is not beautiful, than to reproduce a remarkably handsome human figure.'⁸⁶

This passage also draws on two subsequent lines (157-58) of the Śukranīti.⁸⁷ The main problem lies in 'spiritual contemplation only' and in 'spiritual vision' as the

⁸³ Parul Dave Mukherji, ed. and trans., *The Citrasūtra of the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001, 133. Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 139, 521.

⁸⁴ E. B. Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting, Illustrated by Typical Masterpieces, with an Explanation of their Motives and Ideals*, London: J. Murray, 1908, 'Preface', viii.

⁸⁵ Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 340 n. 58.

⁸⁶ Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, 54-55.

⁸⁷ IV.4.79 (lines 157-58):

*Apī śreyaskaram nṛṇām devabimbamalakṣaṇam
Salakṣaṇam martyāvimbaṃ na hi śreyaskaram sadā*

‘truest standard’: in the text, spiritual contemplation does not stand alone; it derives directly from the words of a text, namely the *lakṣaṇa* as described in meticulous detail.

Coomaraswamy’s *The Aims of Indian Art* is dated 29 May 1908:

Almost the whole philosophy of Indian art is contained in the verse of Sūkracārya’s *Śukranītisāra*: ‘In order that the form of an image may be brought fully and clearly before the mind, the image maker should meditate; and his success will be in proportion to his meditation. No other way - not indeed seeing the object itself - will achieve his purpose.’⁸⁸

Once again, the visualization is made to seem independent of the textual prescriptions. And it is difficult to see what, in the *Śukranīti* passage, leads to ‘in proportion to his meditation’ (although ‘success’ might come from *saṃsiddhyai* in line 147).

Finally, Coomaraswamy re-worked his stance for ‘Hindu View of Art: Historical’, in *The Dance of Śiva* (1915/1918):

‘Let the imager establish images in temples by meditation on the deities who are the objects of his devotion. For the successful achievement of this yoga the lineaments of the image are described in books to be dwelt upon in detail. In no other way, not even by direct and immediate vision of an actual object, is it possible to be so absorbed in contemplation, as thus in the making of images.’⁸⁹

‘The practice of visualization, referred to by Śukrāchārya, is identical in worship and art. The worshipper recites the *dhyāna mantram* describing the deity, and forms a corresponding mental picture, and it is then to this imagined form that his prayers are addressed and the offerings are made. The artist follows identical prescriptions, but proceeds to represent the mental picture in a visible and objective form, by drawing or modeling.’⁹⁰

Here it would seem that Coomaraswamy, having taken his initial understanding of the *Śukranīti* as a given, feels free to elaborate upon it. True, there is a text - the *lakṣaṇa* - that lies behind the visualization, but there is nothing in the *Śukranīti* to indicate that the lengthy rules are to be recited or can be considered to constitute a mantra.

One more line, from later in the chapter, needs to be quoted. This is

Sarkar p. 168, #157-58: ‘But the images of gods, even if deformed, are for the good of men. But the images of men, even if well formed, are never for human good.’ Coomaraswamy, p. 114: ‘Images of the angels, even with the lineaments (*lakṣaṇa*) imperfectly depicted, work well to men, but never those of mortals, even though their lineaments (be accurately represented).’

⁸⁸ Coomaraswamy, *The Aims of Indian Art*, 3.

⁸⁹ *The Dance of Śiva*, 21. The chapter ‘Hindu View of Art: I. History of Aesthetic’, 18-29 in *The Dance of Śiva*, was originally published in *Quest* in London in 1915 (Crouch, *Bibliography*, 208).

⁹⁰ *The Dance of Śiva*, 21-22.

IV.4.320. *Sevyasevakabhāveṣu pratimālakṣanam smṛtam*

Sarkar. 'The marks of images are known from the relations between the adorer and the adored.' And in a note: 'The character of the image may be known from the attitude of the worshipper and the purposes of the worship.'⁹¹

Coomaraswamy. 'The lineaments (*lakṣana*) of images are known (*smṛta*) from the natures (*bhāva*) of the worshipped and the worshipper (*sevyasevaka*).'⁹²

Abanindranath Tagore, 1914 (in *Some Notes on Indian Artistic Anatomy*, 1914). 'Images should conform to prescribed types when they are going to be contemplated in the spirit of worship.'⁹³

Here are contradictory translations. Coomaraswamy seems to have followed Sarkar in producing a translation not easy to understand, and Tagore's version is independent. *Sevyasevaka* means 'master-servant' - by extension, adored and adorer, worshipped and worshipper, or god and devotee.⁹⁴ Perhaps the line can be translated, 'When there's an image and a worshipper, the rules for image-making (must be) recollected.' That is, when Tagore wrote 'Images should conform to prescribed types', he understood *pratimālakṣanam* correctly. He went on to write, 'Does that not imply that the artist is to adhere to shastric formulae only when producing images intended for worship and that he is free, in all other cases, to follow his own art instinct?' Therefore the Śukranīti had set up limits that Tagore welcomed.

There is recognition in the Śukranīti itself of these limits, not in part 4 of ch. IV ('Social Customs and Institutions'), in which the quoted passages appear, but in part 3, 'Arts and Sciences'. In part 4, the types of temples are treated briefly (lines 130-46), and then there is the section on images (lines 147-66) that includes the quotations; this is followed by the long section consisting primarily of iconometric rules. Near the end of the chapter, it is said (lines 405-6) 'The king should always set up such gods in the kingdom, and should every year perform festivals in their honour', and (line 407), 'He should never keep in the temple images broken or made according to false measurements.'⁹⁵ It is clear therefore, that the treatise is a code for the behavior of kings, who must enforce the rules of image making in order to bring prosperity to the realm.

In part 3 of the chapter, on the other hand, there is acknowledgement of art making that lies outside the boundaries of icon production. A list enumerates the various types of *śāstra*. 'That science [*vidyā*] is said to be Śilpa Śāstra which treats of (the construction of) palaces, images [*pratimā*], parks, houses, canals, and other good works'

⁹¹ Sarkar, Śukranīti, 177.

⁹² Coomaraswamy, *Transformation*, 115.

⁹³ Abanindranath Tagore, *Some Notes on Indian Artistic Anatomy*, Calcutta : Indian Society of Oriental Art, 1914, rpt. Miami: HardPress Publishing, n. d., 3.

⁹⁴ As in Krishna worship; see the web site <https://radha.name/news/general-news/self-identification-process> (accessed 8 Feb. 2022).

⁹⁵ Sarkar, Śukranīti, 182.

(lines 115-16).⁹⁶ In addition to *vidyā*, there are sixty-four arts (*kalā*), beginning with dancing (line 133) and ending with the production of betel (line 198). In about the middle of the list, it says (lines 167-68), 'Earthen, wooden, stone, and metal vessels give rise to four separate arts in the matter of their cleansing, dyeing, polishing, or rinsing; picture drawing is also an art.'⁹⁷ Therefore, yes, Abanindranath Tagore was correct to understand the Śukranīti to mean that outside of image-making the artist is free 'to follow his own art instinct'. Sarkar's and Coomaraswamy's understandings of IV.4.320 differed from Tagore's, and Coomaraswamy had little interest in proclaiming the independence of the artist. Sarkar, however, very much did, especially when he turned his attention to the twentieth century.

Benoy Kumar Sarkar

A volume of exegesis appeared around the time of the publication of Sarkar's Śukranīti translation in 1914, entitled *The Positive Background of Hindu Sociology, Book I - Non-Political*. Sarkar attempted to present facts in an entirely objective way, in order to provide the grounds for comparative study. The book contains chapters devoted to 'Relativity of the Nitisastras', geography, ethnology, mineralogy, botany, and zoology. *Book II - Political* did not appear until a decade later, and its four chapters were 'A Preface to Hindu Politics', 'The Economic Foundations of the State', 'The Philosophical Affiliations of Sukra's Materialism', and 'The Categories of International Law'. The 1910s were marked by travels: a stay in China, then one in the U. S. A., interrupted by a visit to Japan (1915-16), and finally a move to Paris in 1921. Numerous publications date from these years: *Vishwashakti* (1914); *Yankeestan or Greater Europe* (1916); *The Beginning of Culture as World Power* (1916); *Chinese Religion Through Hindu Eyes: A Study in the Tendencies of Asiatic Mentality* (1916); *Love in Hindu Literature* (1916); *The Folk Element in Hindu Culture: a Contribution to Socio Religious Studies in Indian Folk Institutions* (1917); and finally two works on aesthetics that will be analyzed in the pages that follow - *Hindu Art: Its Humanism and Modernism* and 'Aesthetics of Young India'.⁹⁸

In his preface to *Chinese Religion Through Hindu Eyes*, Sarkar stated his point of view clearly. 'Neither historically nor philosophically does Asiatic mentality differ from Eur-American. It is only after the brilliant successes of a fraction of mankind subsequent to the Industrial Revolution of the last century that the alleged difference between the two mentalities has been first stated and since then grossly exaggerated.'⁹⁹ Mentalities, systems of belief, do exist, but the spirituality of India has been

⁹⁶ Sarkar, Śukranīti, 155.

⁹⁷ Sarkar, Śukranīti, 160.

⁹⁸ Titles taken from the bibliography in Satadru Sen, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar: Restoring the Nation to the World*, Delhi, London, New York: Routledge, 2015, 189-190.

⁹⁹ Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *Chinese Religion through Hindu Eyes: A Study in the Tendencies of Asiatic Mentality*, Shanghai, 1916; rpt. New Delhi and Madras: Asian Educational Services, 1988, 11. For a study of the work of Sarkar, Sen, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar*.

overemphasized and that of China insufficiently recognized. The stages of development in both China and India are broadly comparable, due only in part to historical interactions. 'The unity in notions and conventions may as well be due to the sameness of mental outfit and psychical organism and the consequent uniformity of responses to the stimuli presented by the facts and phenomena of the object world.'¹⁰⁰ *Chinese Religion* is filled with long quotations and summaries drawn from the studies of leading authorities. Assessing the validity of Sarkar's conclusions regarding connections and developmental schema is no simple task because the sources he cites are in many cases outdated. At any rate, the passage from the *Śukranīti* that was the focus above (IV.4, lines 147-49) is invoked twice, once in the context of Song-dynasty neo-Confucianism: 'Hindu Dhyāna or meditation is the chief characteristic of this re-interpreted Confucianism.' This is where Sarkar saw the connection with the 'dhyāna-element in art', as emphasized in the *Śukranīti* - which is then deemed 'the fountain-head of neo-Confucianist art.'¹⁰¹

The 44-page booklet *Hindu Art: Its Humanism and Modernism* was published in New York in 1920.¹⁰² Sarkar acknowledged that in the court of public opinion his battle against 'professional spiritualitarians' (such as Coomaraswamy, who is not mentioned) was on the losing side. He granted that 'It is generally held that the inspiration of Hindu painters and sculptors is totally different from that of the Westerns.' Sarkar presented his own case on several fronts. The drama *Shakuntala* and other texts provide evidence of the existence in ancient India of representational painting, including landscape as well as portraiture. The subject matter of the European tradition in art - Greek mythology and Biblical stories - is hardly less spiritual than what appears in Hindu art. The *Śukranīti* is quoted - images of men 'lead away from heaven and yield grief' (IV.4.158) - but only to demonstrate the fallacy of taking a stray statement in a treatise as an indication of the beliefs or practices of an entire population. In a concluding chapter, 'Hindu Technique in Post-Impressionism', Sarkar characterized certain formal qualities in Indian art: 'lines of graceful motion, the play of geometric contours, the ripple of forms, the flowing rhythm of bends and joints in space'. In presenting evidence for the impact abroad of such visual experiences, Sarkar pointed to statements by Rodin, where the case is strong, as well as to the work of van Gogh and Gauguin. Finally, Sarkar turned back to India, where he hoped Young India would join the revolutionary artists of the West on an equal footing, 'freely to move and to strive, to un-make and to make - boldly to borrow and to lend as an independent unit in the bourse of spiritual exchange - unhampered to struggle, to experiment, to live'.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Sarkar, *Chinese Religion*, 4.

¹⁰¹ Sarkar, *Chinese Religion*, 255.

¹⁰² Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *Hindu Art: Its Humanism and Modernism, an Introductory Essay*, New York B. W. Huebsch, 1920; rpt. Milton Keynes: Trieste, n. d..

¹⁰³ Sarkar, *Hindu Art*, 45, 16, 28-29, 36, 43-44.

Hindu Art was reviewed (presumably by O. C. Gangoly) in the Calcutta journal *Rūpam*, April 1921. The review cites Sarkar's 'inability to explain away the dictum enunciated by Shukra - that "the images of gods, even if deformed, are for the good of men - but the images of men, even if well formed, are never for human good." This data from the Shukra cycle is very unfortunate for Mr. Sarkar's humanistic ideals of Indian Art. Shukra's dictum is demonstrated and honoured in the leading phases of Indian Art.'¹⁰⁴ Gangoly (1881-1974), editor of the newly founded and elegantly produced journal *Rūpam*, was a collector, scholar, and admirer of Coomaraswamy. When Coomaraswamy had lectured in the course of his visits to India in 1910-11 and subsequently, it was Gangoly who changed the lantern slides.¹⁰⁵

Sarkar's next project was 'Aesthetics of Young India', published in *Rūpam* in the issue of January 1922.¹⁰⁶ In eighteen densely argued sections, Sarkar, who had moved from the U. S. to Paris, created his own manifesto for the Young Artists of Bengal. It was an attempt to construct a system of universals. There are those who recommend learning from abroad and adapting what you've learned, wrote Sarkar; others believe in developing your own 'national and racial genius'. Those in the latter group tend to believe in a fixed antithesis of East and West and to make judgements on the basis of criteria (from history, literary criticism, and anthropology) extraneous to art itself. The notion that one can retreat into the shell of Hindu tradition is no more possible than shutting oneself off from Western science. It should also be remembered, Sarkar continued, that prior to the Industrial Revolution East and West developed along parallel tracks, and as soon as you identify a trait supposedly exclusively Indian, you can find that it also exists in Europe. Schiller, for instance, stated that 'the purpose of art is to lift us from the sensible world'. Science and technology have played catch-up, but certain areas of culture - music, for instance - have not yet evolved.

It is important to understand what art truly is, Sarkar maintained. It does not reside in subject matter, not even in messages perceived through psychological analysis. The language of art is independent of narrative structures and has an absolute autonomy. Yet it still enriches human experience. We must learn its language - point, line, angle, cone, square, curve, mass, and volume. 'We must also have to practise understanding the message, which in every instance is spiritual, of the lumps, patches, contours, balls, depths and heights.' A sculptor creates from a 'deadness an organism of objects in space' that consists of 'cones, cavities, flats'. A still life painting can possess 'a most profound spiritual mission through the sheer influence of mass, volume, position, or colour arrangement'. The formations must explain themselves. It is also possible to create 'pure paintings' that consist of nothing but colour.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ *Rūpam* 6 (April 1921), 40.

¹⁰⁵ Pal, *Quest*, 78.

¹⁰⁶ Benoy Kumar Sarkar, 'The Aesthetics of Young India', *Rūpam* 9 (January 1922), 8-24.

¹⁰⁷ Sarkar, 'Aesthetics', 18, 19, 21.

These are universal principles, and composition can be considered geometry; in fact, 'the spiritual basis' of painting and sculpture 'is geometry, the most abstract and cosmopolitan of all *vidyas*' [sciences]. When you analyze a Gandharan relief geometrically (figure 1, where the grid has been composed on the basis of Sarkar's written description), you can see that 'we are viewing nothing but a drama of forms and the interplay of light and shade', and the subject matter is irrelevant.¹⁰⁸ The concluding sentence incorporates more Sanskrit terms than found elsewhere: 'Such are the universal laws of *rasavidya* or aesthetics, such as the most generalized canons of *shilpa-shastra*. . . .'¹⁰⁹



Figure 1 'Le sommeil des femmes': the Bodhisattva, seated on the couch, at left, takes leave of the palace. From Paul Mallon, *Quatorze sculptures indiennes de la collection Paul Mallon*, with descriptive text by Victor Goloubew, Paris [1920], pl. III. Superimposed diagram added on the basis of the analysis of Benoy Kumar Sarkar, 'The Aesthetics of Young India', 21. Artwork by Lael Ensor-Bennett.

¹⁰⁸ Sarkar, 'Aesthetics', 21.

¹⁰⁹ Sarkar, 'Aesthetics', 24.

Sarkar's essay was followed by a rejoinder by 'Agastya', O. C. Gangoly.¹¹⁰ Agastya did not seem to grasp that Sarkar was attempting to establish fundamental principles equally applicable to the art of East and West and regarded him as only wanting to encourage the importation of the latest European fad. He wrote that 'If you are not in harmony with your own thoughts you cannot harmonise with the thoughts of others.' It should be remembered that for Agastya, it was only recently that the shackles of Western academic training had been cast off, and that the task of 'recognizing and developing [one's] own national and racial genius' was still ongoing.

A second rejoinder, by the young Stella Kramrisch, appeared in the April 1922 issue of *Rūpam* (the October 1921 issue had contained her first article).¹¹¹ Kramrisch rejected Sarkar's position on two main grounds. First, she questioned the attempt to establish universals: 'We do not know of any laws of art of universal value.' Second, she did not believe that elements of composition can be separated from what Sarkar called 'literary factors' because these values in fact comprise 'the whole complex of reality, conceptions, and impressions that exist in the unit out of which the work is born.' For Sarkar, 'metaphysicians of aesthetics' will see in a Chinese painting of a solitary man in a mountain scene 'the cool contemplative calm of Chinese consciousness conducive to the quest of the beyond.'¹¹² But, in fact, Sarkar maintained, the idiom is independent of the theme. Kramrisch, on the other hand, was unwilling to grant that it is possible to push the theme aside and to contemplate the idiom alone. (To put it differently, syntax is meaningless without semantics.) She recognized that there is an Indian genius (although she didn't use the word) because 'a form relation of one and the same character is prevalent in Indian art from Bharhut to the modern school of painting in Bengal'. Sarkar's analysis of what she considered a 'weak Gandharan relief' - the relief illustrated here as figure 1 - only proved 'how little he is able to discover that irrational geometry and immanent structure which alone constitute a work of art.'

A rejoinder to the rejoinders appeared in *Rūpam* in 1923.¹¹³ Full of nitpicking accusations of failures to understand, it makes for tedious reading, although twice Sarkar, anticipating Edward W. Said (1935-2003), linked Western scholarly analyses to Western power in a way more forthright than in 'Aesthetics' itself: 'But the historic uniformity in the mental and moral makeup of the Eastern and Western races has been ignored and suppressed by the philosophers and savants of the West in learned discussions, such as have been conducted during the period of their military, political and economic domination of the East.'¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Agastya [pseud.], 'The Aesthetics of Young India: A Rejoinder', *Rūpam* 9 (Jan. 1922), 24-27.

¹¹¹ Stella Kramrisch, 'The Aesthetics of Young India: A Rejoinder', *Rūpam* 10 (April 1922), 66-67.

¹¹² Sarkar, 'Aesthetics', 15.

¹¹³ Benoy Kumar Sarkar, 'Social Philosophy in Aesthetics', *Rūpam* 15-16 (July-December 1923), 88-99.

¹¹⁴ Sarkar, 'Social Philosophy', 92.

Sarkar and the American artist Max Weber

Sarkar's approach to art bears echoes of Roger Fry's formal analysis, of Vasily Kandinsky's construction of a grammar of non-representational art, and - more remotely - of the reduction to geometric elements embodied by Froebel's blocks. But the primary influence can be pinpointed - to a personal friendship with the American artist Max Weber (1881-1961). After spending three hours with Weber in New York City, Sarkar wrote (on 4 January 1915) to the man who had introduced them that he found Weber a genius who 'has a distinctive message of his own which will revolutionise European and American philosophy of life & make him a kindred spirit to me, a Hindu'.¹¹⁵ A few days later Sarkar sent Weber two reproductions of works by Abanindranath Tagore. Weber's own aesthetic treatise, *Essays on Art*, was published in New York in 1916. On August 30 of that year Sarkar wrote to him from Japan, 'Thank you very much for your valuable *Essays on Art*. I am always your admirer and begin to use your book while preparing my monograph on Hindu art.'¹¹⁶ This project was carried out in the course of an association with Harvard and resulted in the 1920 *Hindu Art*. A year later, Sarkar, having arrived in Paris, wrote to Weber, 16 August 1921, 'I have just now finished writing out a rather long essay, "The Aesthetics of Young India". If it comes out in print you will see how deeply I appreciated and still continue to value your spiritual influence on my being.'¹¹⁷

'Spiritual influence': in fact the term *spiritual* can be considered problematic. Sarkar tended to use the word in two different ways. It has a very general application, for everything an Asian considers essential to 'spirituality' can be found in Europe, according to the *Rūpam* article. In works of art, *spiritual* has a more particular sense. 'We have to practise understanding the message, which in every case is spiritual, of the lumps, patches, contours, balls, depths, and heights.' Does that mean that the lumps and patches and so forth are inherently spiritual? There may be a degree of ambiguity on this score, but, on balance, it is rather the case that the spirituality is the product of the pictorial composition. The 'most profound spiritual mission' is achieved through the influence of mass, volume, position, and colour arrangement. It is 'the intermarriage of shapes' that matters. 'Mere mechanical manipulation' of the lumps and patches will not produce a spiritual message.¹¹⁸

Sarkar's 'intermarriage of shapes' finds deep resonance in Weber's *Essays on Art*, in which 'the intersection of solids [like the sphere, cube, and cylinder] is like a

¹¹⁵ Max Weber papers, Archives of American Art, Washington D. C., Box 3, Folder 49. This passage was also quoted by Ying Sze Pek, 'Design, Abstraction, and Photographic Art: Max Weber at the White School, 1914-1918', in Anne McCauley, *Clarence H. White and His World: The Art & Craft of Photography, 1895-1925*, Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2017, 206, n. 20.

¹¹⁶ Archives, Box 3, Folder 49.

¹¹⁷ Archives, Box 3, Folder 50.

¹¹⁸ Sarkar, 'Aesthetics', 12, 18, 19, 18.

marriage for a new form to come' and it is 'through the intermarriage of forms that one is to awaken emotions of awe, grandeur and wonder, even to exaltation'.¹¹⁹ But for Weber plastic spiritual principles or ideals were embodied in the Parthenon and in archaic sculpture, and an entire section is entitled 'spiritual tactility'.¹²⁰ This is an elusive quality that physical objects possess, it seems, when they have properly entered our consciousness. A flower 'wants to be a flower in us, in our soul. Things live in us and through us.' Spirituality can also be bestowed upon objects: to see is to illuminate objects 'with a spiritual transcendence or radiance'.¹²¹

Max Weber had studied art with Arthur Wesley Dow (1857-1922) at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. Dow's pioneering book *Composition* (first edition, 1898) presented a course of study Dow credited to Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908), authority on Japanese art and curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. He thought music was the key to the fine arts and 'that space-art may be called visual music.'¹²² In Dow's *Composition* ('putting together of lines and masses') the initial stage of practice consisted of constructing pleasing geometric diagrams, which could be extracted from compositions seen in Japanese landscape painting or in the work of Michelangelo. After attaining proficiency in the principles of composition, drawing came easily. Traditional pedagogy was turned on its head.

There is nothing about spirituality in Dow's *Composition*, and in the case of Weber a role should surely be imagined for Vassily Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art*, published in Munich in 1912. A small translated extract appeared in Alfred Stieglitz's New York journal *Camera* the same year, and in 1914 an English translation was published in London. 'Form itself, even if completely abstract resembling geometric form, has its own inner sound, is a spiritual being possessing qualities that are identical with that form.'¹²³ This sounds rather like Weber, and Sarkar's views differ. For him the building blocks, the phonemes, are imprecise entities like lumps and patches. He is at pains to sound universal and wants to construct an embryonic realm devoid of nameable objects, because that allows him to place description in a separate category of experience. It is interesting to speculate what direction Sarkar's thinking might have taken had he learned when he was in Shanghai about the connoisseurship of Chinese calligraphy or landscape painting, in which the building blocks are not amorphous shapes but a repertory of brushstrokes. It seems unlikely that Sarkar read Kandinsky himself. If he had, presumably he would have noticed the reference to Mme Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society and then decided (not incorrectly) that this was evidence that the practice of *dhyāna* had spread to Europe, just as it had to China and influenced

¹¹⁹ Weber, *Essays on Art*, 68, 71.

¹²⁰ Weber, *Essays on Art*, 12 and 13-16.

¹²¹ Weber, *Essays on Art*, 15, 37.

¹²² Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition*, New York: Baker and Taylor 1905, 5.

¹²³ Kandinsky, 'On the Spiritual in Art', in Kenneth V. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, New York: Da Capo Press 1994, 163.

neo-Confucianism. If he were alive today he would also know about the visionary paintings of the Swedish mystic Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), which provide considerably stronger evidence of the practice of *dhyāna*.

The relationship between geometry and the spiritual in Sarkar's 'Aesthetics' is not altogether clear. It may be that it is not the juxtapositions and intermarriage, in and of themselves, that give rise to the spiritual qualities but, instead, the juxtapositions seen against the ground of a geometric grid. In the United States, compositional analyses were common in the early twentieth century. In addition to Dow's diagrams, in 1907 a whole book appeared devoted to the diagrammatic analysis of dynamic forces in the paintings of the European tradition - *A Theory of Pure Design* by Denman Waldo Ross (1853-1935).¹²⁴ (This was the same Ross who became Coomaraswamy's patron at the Museum of Fine Arts, giving Coomaraswamy an opportunity to join a conversation he shunned.) In a book on art appreciation of 1914, Charles Caffin included

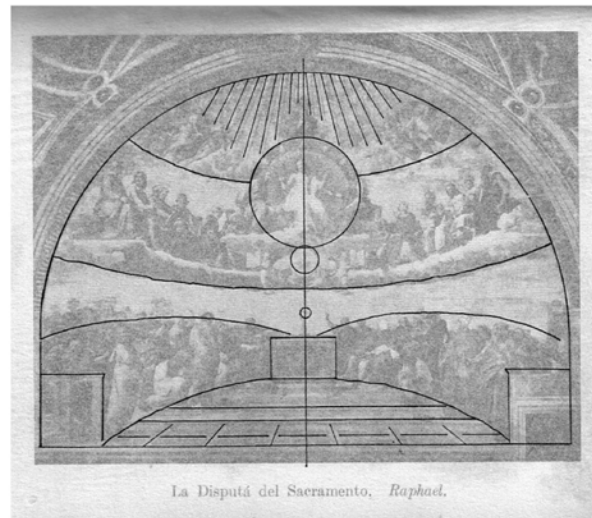


Figure 2 Raphael's *Disputa*, with compositional analysis on overlay transparent paper, from Charles H. Caffin, *A Guide to Pictures*, 1914, opp. p. 56.

an analysis of Raphael's *Disputa* on overlay translucent paper (figure 2).¹²⁵ Inner structures were so much in the air that at the time of the New York Armory Show in 1913, Theodore Roosevelt and the painter Arthur B. Davies had this exchange:

Still in high good humor, the famous man complimented Arthur Davies on a composition of figures he had in the next room. 'All built up geometrically, Mr. President', said the painter, 'just full of pentagons and triangles on the inside.' 'I

¹²⁴ Denman Waldo Ross, *A Theory of Pure Design: Harmony, Balance, Rhythm*, rpt. New York: Peter Smith, 1907.

¹²⁵ Charles H. Caffin, *A Guide to Pictures for Beginners and Students*, Garden City: Doubleday, Page, 1914, opp. p. 56.

dare say', answered the Colonel, 'and I dare say the Venus of Milo has a skeleton on the inside, and that's the right place to keep it.'¹²⁶

All these overlays or diagrams had a life of their own; although dependent upon completely fleshed out works of art, they are also works of art in their own right. Turning back to India, one wonders whether Sarkar ever realized that his analysis of the Gandharan relief (figure 1) bore a kinship with the iconometric rules laid down in the *Śukranīti*, which, at least mentally, can be imagined as extracted from the text in which they are described, and independent of the images whose proportions they defined. These grids can be understood as spiritual not because of how they are experienced but because that is what the text proclaims them to be. Sarkar's geometry was both universal and culture-specific - though he made no explicit acknowledgement of this. Compositional analyses along the lines of figure 1 have been rare in the years since, but the 1962 *Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture* by Alice Boner (1889-1981) features diagrams of the schemes she perceived in the reliefs of the Ellora Caves.¹²⁷ Furthermore, in an attempt to sum up the essence of Indian art in a single sentence, Stella Kramrisch wrote in 1953 (after she had become established in the United States), 'Visual art in India is movement, precipitated into measured lines and volumes.'¹²⁸

Conceivably Sarkar might have been able to class Kramrisch's movement with his lumps and patches. But if these are culture-specific signs, phonemes that are manipulated, or married one to another, they could, instead, be considered the vegetally and zoologically perceived body parts that appear in the original *Citralakṣaṇa*.

Fast forward

The wise ruler ensured that the sacred images produced in the kingdom conformed with the guidelines laid down in scripture. Rules reached an extreme in the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, a Buddhist text of the second half of the first millennium, which maintained that the cotton for a sacred painting on cloth must be gathered from a pure site by someone who had taken Buddhist vows and spun by a freshly-bathed higher-caste virgin.¹²⁹ The presumable distance from actual practice calls into question even the mild prescriptions of the *Śukranīti*, which call only for some kind of meditation on the part of the sculptor. In fact, in a review of the Sanskrit literature and study of contemporary practices, Isabella Nardi, in a book published in 2006, concluded that the texts simply invite the image-maker to imagine the figure described. 'This imagining should not necessarily be taken to mean that the painter or reader of a *citrasūtra* was practicing *yoga*. . .'¹³⁰ At the same time she found that the rules of proportion in texts

¹²⁶ Walter Pach, *Queer Thing Painting*, New York: Harper, 1938, 200.

¹²⁷ Alice Boner, *Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962.

¹²⁸ Quoted in Miller, *Exploring India's Sacred Art*, 29.

¹²⁹ Matthew Kapstein, 'Weaving the World: the Ritual Art of Paṭa in Pāla Buddhism and its Legacy in Tibet', *History of Religions* 34 (1995): 241-52.

¹³⁰ Nardi, *Theory of Citrasūtras*, 2.

were not followed blindly in workshops but that artists were aware that they represent principles, 'a way of reasoning', that do apply.¹³¹

Meanwhile, Parul Dave Mukherjee published a new translation of the most frequently cited *Citrasūtra*, in the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, in 2001. One of the four types of painting, *satya* (true), she translated as 'naturalistic'.¹³² The term is defined in the text as follows (41.2ab): 'Whichever painting bears a similarity with the world [*lokasādrśyam*] (that painting) is called Satya ('Naturalistic')." Coomaraswamy, in 1933, had translated *satya* as 'Pure or Sacred' and wrote that 'If we understood *sādrśya* then to mean 'illusion' or 'realism', verisimilitude of any crude or naïve sort, we would be contradicting all that we know of the oriental conception of art.'¹³³ Contrary evidence does not easily dislodge beliefs central to one's identity, even in the case of the most brilliant and erudite.

It helps, in understanding Coomaraswamy, to see how he embraced Arts and Crafts Movement values and extended them to an imagined India. It is more difficult to sympathize with his willful distortion of Sanskrit texts and the inflexibility of his opinions. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to consider the writings of Benoy Kumar Sarkar as representing a diametrically opposed position. What Sarkar and Coomaraswamy held in common was a belief in the essential place of the spiritual. For Coomaraswamy, it was found in the performance of an act of mental discipline, followed by adherence to traditional rules. For Sarkar, the spiritual could be discovered through the manipulation of abstract shapes. Neither Coomaraswamy nor Sarkar recognized this commonality or wondered if what lay at the end of the quest was in both cases a geometrical order.

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¹³¹ Nardi, *Theory of Citrasūtras*, 36. See also Nardi, 'Re-evaluating the role of text in Indian art: towards a shastric analysis of the image of Shri Nathji in Nathdvara miniature painting', *South Asia Research* 29.2 (2009): 99-126. Another study of workshop practices and iconometry is John F. Mosteller, *The Measure of Form: A New Approach for the Study of Indian Sculpture*, New Delhi: Abhinav, 1991.

¹³² Parul Dave Mukherji, *The Citrasūtra of the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001, 159. See also on this passage, Nardi, *Theory of Citrasūtras*, 30-33.

¹³³ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, 'Viṣṇudharmottara, Chapter XLI', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 52, 1932, (13-21) 13 and 21. Unfortunately, in quoting this sentence, Mukherji (xxxvii) replaced *naïve* with *native*.



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