

DR. COOMARASWAMY ON ART¹

AN age which applauds the specialist and the genius will not acknowledge the master. Applause, we might say, costs nothing whereas the master is there to enforce a responsibility. And if modern man pays with a handclap all the debt he acknowledges to genius, from the master he must submit to learn a truth.

Dr. Coomaraswamy is a master in the philosophy of art, as his great pupil, Eric Gill, was a master in stone carving and letter cutting. As a master he embodies in his work the whole positive weight of traditional truth, and in acknowledging him we affirm the spiritual foundations of our civilization.

If this were a tribute merely to the man, to the person, Ananda Coomaraswamy, it would be no more than flattery; but Dr. Coomaraswamy's position is clearly indicated in an incisive answer to critics printed among the present collection of essays: 'If I assert . . ., etc., . . . I am not necessarily wrong merely because this position was "earlier" maintained by Plato and in the Bhagavad Gita . . . The sooner my critics realise . . . that I am not out to express any views, opinion or philosophy of my "own," the sooner will they find out what I am talking about.' For if the principles he argues and explains are common to Europe and the East, to Aquinas and (implicitly) to all save the essentially commercial eras of human civilisation: to Maori portraiture and the Neolithic cave drawings no less than to Chartres: it is precisely because Dr. Coomaraswamy has not invented them. Neither is the basis of such agreement sought in any type of common-denominator doctrine, humanist or modernist. It would be truer to say that the massive agreement Dr. Coomaraswamy shows is the unanimous voice of spiritually educated mankind against the shallow condescension of modern criticism.

Two assumptions of the traditional doctrine are that all things made by human art are divine images,² and 'the artist is not a special kind of man but every man is a special kind of artist.' Applied in a modern context the assumptions appear strained. They appear to be statements not of known truth but of Utopian wishes. In fact the society in which we live denies them. If we point out we are speaking in terms of principles as stable as man's essential nature, then it is said we have rated human nature too high. We have

¹ *Why Exhibit Works of Art?* Collected Essays on the Traditional or 'Normal' View of Art. By Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. (Luzac; 6/-).

² 'All traditions agree in seeing in the warp of tissues made by hand an image of the fontal-ricing of the dawn-light of creation' (p. 80).

not taken into account a man must labour at the task he has not chosen and lend his hands, whether he lends his understanding or no, to what another has designed. It is all very well for the artist to wish everyone as free from mundane cares as himself. The responsible man must drudge to feed his family and make money against the insecurity of jobs.

This line of misunderstanding comes from 'the world.' From the flesh and the devil come the aesthetic theory and artistic practice by which the artist works to exploit a feeling or flatter a patron and wants fame for recompense.

According to the traditional and normal view anonymity is the natural condition of the artist's work and usefulness its justification³; for the artist is not a special kind of man doing special work but the normal man doing the work which is normal to mankind. Now mankind's normal work is to make and provide all those things which are needful to body and mind; and there is nothing a man's body may need but should, if the man be wise and the thing well made, satisfy his mind also. This satisfaction is twofold: by the fitness of external form or shape to the purpose for which a thing is made; by fitness of its intelligible form to a divine exemplar. Thus the artist in his making is responsible to an eternal pattern of things and his works, however humble, are beautiful because truly patterned upon, and thus truly meaning God.

That is what making means for normal mankind. It means ultimately, for one who has a mind for the humility of beauty, to set forth analogies of divine attributes. But if art means that, it is because normally religious mankind means it so. Not every job that is fudged to fill the hours of a hired day speaks truly of the heavenly goodness.

What a work of art really means is a thing for the patient student to find out, and the museum keeper will be competent to speak of a drinking mug or an axe head when he has relived in his own mind the spiritual and social conditions of its manufacture and might have made it himself for his own use.⁴ Only so will he, as a competent

³ ' . . . from a Christian point of view, the work of art is always a means, and never an end in itself. Being a means, it is ordained to a given end, without which it has no *raison d'être*, and can only be treated as bric-a-brac. The current approach may be compared to that of a traveller who, when he finds a signpost, proceeds to admire its elegance, to ask who made it, and finally cuts it down and decides to use it as a mantelpiece ornament ' (p. 108).

⁴ ' One can in fact only be said to have understood the work, or to have any more than a dilettante knowledge of it, to the extent that he can identify himself with the mentality of the original artist and patron. The man can only be said to have understood Romanesque or Indian art who comes very near to forgetting that he has not made it himself for his own use ' (p. 75).

iconographer, read the form that the shape signifies and understand that its ornament is the perfection which renders explicit the meaning of the work. To quote one of Dr. Coomaraswamy's favourite examples: '. . . the man who may have been a "barbarian" but could look upward to the roof tree of his house and say "There hangs the Light of Lights," or down to the hearth and say "There is the Centre of the World," was more completely a Man than one whose house, however well supplied with labour-saving and sanitary apparatus, is merely "a machine to live in." He was more completely a Man because his mental life, however 'primitive,' was in the dimension of cosmic analogies. To such a life we can understand that the most precious promises of the Divine Imager can have meaning.

Modern manufacture means money. It means money in the sense that the form of the work is dictated not by an eternal pattern of things, but by what will sell. You may say that ultimately it is meaningless or ultimately idolatrous. Both inferences are true. In the midst of such chaos of the art-life of the people, Western man seizes desperately upon the artist—the maker of adornments—to seek in his work the 'significance' which the working life of the majority has lost.⁵ But the artist is no longer the 'master'; for modern man will have no masters. He neither enforces nor submits to an eternal pattern of things. He professes, in the modern formula, the aesthetic significance of modern life through the self-expression of the artist: conveys, that is, to a people who will obey no intellectual norms of meaning the exquisitely luxurious expression of what meaninglessness feels like. He gives to the age its tragic utterance. He is its prophet and saviour but the utmost of his prophetic message and of his saving power is, when he is honest, nothing. When he is not, it is luxury and flattery of the people; and it is hard to be a modern artist and an honest man.

Is the tirade exaggerated? Does not the artist in his modern rôle exercise an essential function in a socialised manufacture? Is not modern man on the way to finding new cosmic meanings that new economic methods may make explicit through the work of the artist. The questions exhibit hopeless confusions. If it were possible for a man to be human by proxy: to save his soul by proxy . . .

⁵ . . . we may say that the life we call civilized is more nearly an animal and mechanical life than a human life; and that in all these respects it contrasts unfavourably with the life of savages, of American Indians for example, to whom it has never occurred that manufacture, the activity of making things for use, could ever be made an artless activity' (p. 66).

if luxury were a form of obedience to an eternal exemplar we might hold out some hope. And if it said to us, 'Seek you *first* the kingdom of God,' why do we wheedle ourselves into the belief that to seek first the kingdom of money is a step in the right direction? Or expect from a first false step some intimation of the right direction to dawn upon us? We should not expect as much of a man lost in a physical quagmire, but our quagmire is a spiritual one.

It is more than the artist's job to put right the social conditions in which it has become so difficult for him to work normally. Of course he wants normal conditions. Unfailingly his demand for them is urgent, and on this account he is looked to for political inspiration. But the essential conditions of his work are not political ones. They are to seek first the kingdom of God and to love poverty for the work's sake. They do not guarantee 'success' in the modern fashion, but at least they preserve in the artist himself the indispensable temper of his work.

Critics cited in Dr. Coomaraswamy's book complain that in advancing these principles he has put forward nothing constructive. What is constructive and what is not must of course depend on what you are building. But those who love the artist's work for luxury's sake and rest complacent in the 'subhuman condition of intellectual irresponsibility' in which the bulk of the world's work is done resemble men who have uprooted a tree to devour its fruit and yet complain of the gardener that his science of planting and tending the tree 'offers nothing constructive.'

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Reprints of the Panegyric, 'God's Happy Warrior,' preached by the Very Rev. Fr. Bernard Delany, O.P., and printed in the August BLACKFRIARS, together with the reproduction of the portrait by James Gunn, may be obtained, Price 6d., from THE EDITOR, BLACKFRIARS, OXFORD. It is also hoped in the near future to publish most of the tributes and articles that appeared in the August number, with several additional Sermons and Articles by Fr. Vincent McNabb, at a price yet to be fixed. Send in your application as soon as possible.