

Transcultural Literature and Art, Dance and Sex in the Early Twentieth Century

ANANDA COOMARASWAMY'S POEM 'NEW ENGLAND WOODS'

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Ananda Coomaraswamy is remembered not as a poet, but as a philosopher who became one of the twentieth century's greatest historians of Asian art. Write verse he did, though, and even published

a few examples of it in various literary magazines in addition – once only – to creating a tiny poetry volume of his own. That rare little book was given the functional title *Three Poems*, and in 1920 was printed manually on a hand-press operated by the important British Modernist sculptor, Eric Gill. Two of the poems seem forced and are rather tortuous to read; the third one, however, more than makes up for them. Titled 'New England Woods'¹ and illustrated on the facing page with an intriguing woodcut by Gill (Figure 1), it runs as follows:

In early spring, the birches bare,
Lingering snow, and dry brown bracken,
Unclouded sky, and summer air –
No breath of wind, untrodden earth.

Between the stems a white fawn flits,
Unclad, unhidden, fearless, gay;
She seems to say to me, 'Be still –
He only finds who does not seek.

'My breasts and feet are fair and fine,
But not more silvery than the birch,
And not more fragrant than a flower –
Do not desire me more than these.



Figure 1. Illustration for Ananda Coomaraswamy's 'New England Woods', by Eric Gill. Woodcut. 9.5 × 5.7 cm. As published in A K Coomaraswamy, *Three Poems*, Ditchling 1920. Lost.

'As you love trees or clouds, love me:
For you may come, or stay away,
But I, like these, move on for ever –
I am not changed by love or hate.' (*Three Poems*, np)

On a first reading, it appears a charming, if simple, lyric, probably jotted down as an exercise by Coomaraswamy after his move across the Atlantic from London to Boston in 1917. On closer examination, however, the motif of the piece, the circumstances of its composition and the aesthetics of the woodcut that accompanies it hint not only at Coomaraswamy's seminal role in the formation of Modernist thought in Britain and the United States, but also at the more widespread impact of Asian culture on that of the West during the years leading up to, and following, the First World War.

Eric Gill's connection with the production of *Three Poems* provides a good enough starting point for a discussion. The sculptor had met Coomaraswamy at the home of the artist William Rothenstein – an Indiophile and prolific collector of artworks from the subcontinent – not long after his move from Ceylon to London in 1906 (Rothenstein, *Men and Memories* 89). An enthusiastic (if somewhat unorthodox) Catholic who would later enter a monastic existence of his own, Gill was immediately attracted to the way in which the production of classical Indian painting and sculpture had been intimately connected with the lives of working religious communities such as the Buddhist cave complex at Ajanta, the Jain shrines of Gwalior and Mount Abu, or the Hindu temples of Elephanta, Konark and Khajuraho. He wrote later of Coomaraswamy

I dare not confess myself his disciple; that would only embarrass him. It is absurd to say that he has influenced me, that would imply that his influence has borne fruit. May it be so — but I do not claim it. (Gill, *Autobiography* 174)

Acquiring Western artists as disciples was all part of what might be termed Coomaraswamy's master plan. His main objective in moving to England had been to work to challenge the negative image of Indian art that still prevailed in Europe. In 1908 he wrote

The main difficulty so far seems to have been that Indian art has been studied so far only by archaeologists. It is not archaeologists, but artists . . . who are the best qualified to judge of the significance of works of art considered as art, and to unravel the influences apparent in them. (Coomaraswamy, *The Influence of Greek on Indian Art* 1)

The best examples of Indian sculpture in London at the time were in the British Museum's collection, but this had been purposefully segregated from the 'fine art' in the institution's Greek galleries by positioning it among the anthropological exhibits on the upper floor (Arrowsmith, *Modernism* 11). This explicit differentiation in value between the two art traditions

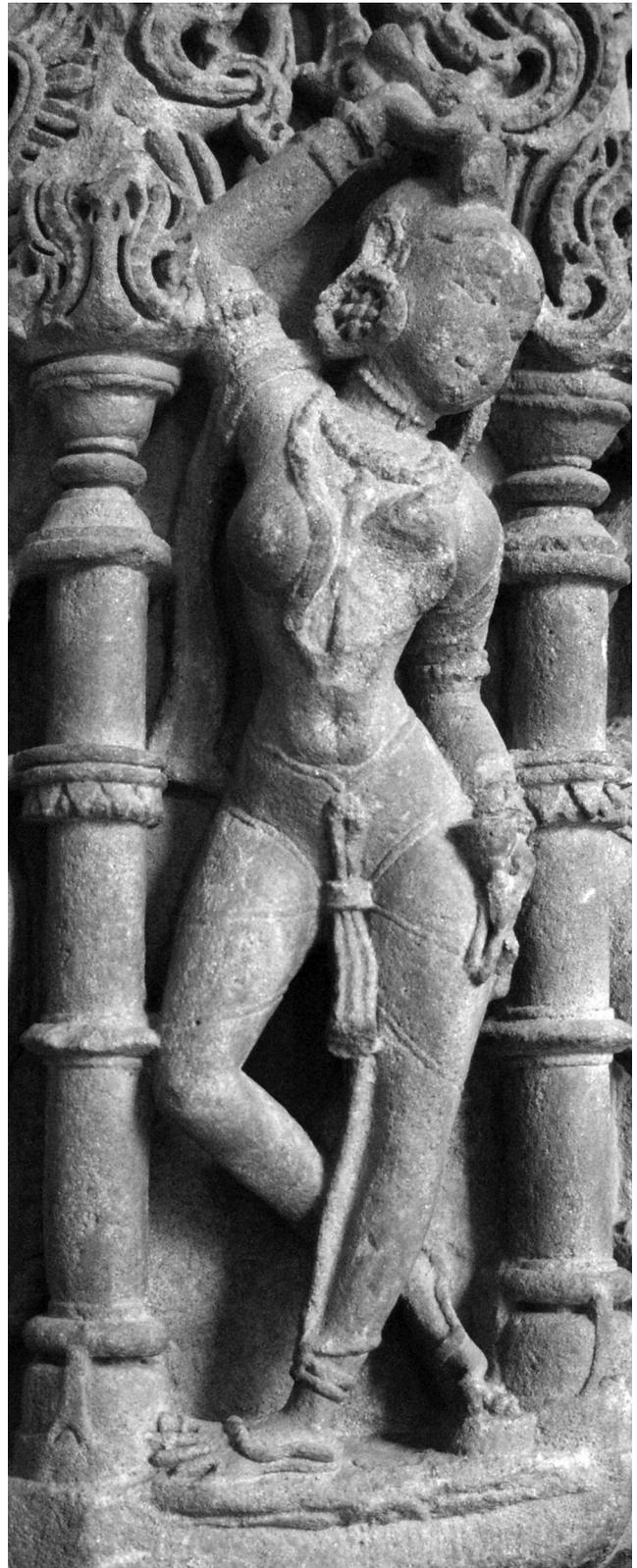


Figure 2. Jain column base with depictions of dancer figures, probably from Gujarat. Eleventh century CE. Limestone. 106 cm high. British Museum, London.



Figure 3. Photograph of a painting from Cave 1 at Ajanta depicting a bodhisattva, by Victor Goloubew. 1910. As published in *Ars Asiatica* 10 (1927).

had obvious political ramifications, helping to cement into place the idea of European cultural hegemony in Asia (Figure 2).

Coomaraswamy had already experienced the effects of such hegemony at first hand. The son of a Tamil nobleman and an English woman, he had returned to Ceylon as a mineralogical researcher after completing a degree in geology at University College London in 1902. Eager to immerse himself in the culture of the country of his birth, he was stunned to discover how much of it had already been swept away by the prevailing rage for Western aesthetics. He lamented three years later

I thought of the homes of my native friends, how they were filled with ugly and useless furniture and ornaments, utterly unsuited to their needs, and pitiful even as examples of the worst that the European trader can turn out, and I knew it to be a part of what is happening all the world over. (Coomaraswamy, *Borrowed Plumes* 6)

He was not far wrong. Even Tokyo, a city untouched by colonialism and the largest urban centre in Asia, had found itself in the grip of a powerful and pervasive ‘Europe craze’ since the mid-nineteenth century.

It was in Tokyo, however, that the tide of cultural influence had already begun to turn. There, the art historian Okakura

Kakuzō had presided over a reawakening of interest in Japanese art and design, founding the country’s first academy dedicated to teaching skills associated with these in 1890. The year that Coomaraswamy arrived back in Ceylon, Okakura was in India seeking to re-establish what he saw as a broken continuity between the religions, literatures and visual art traditions of eastern and southern Asia, positioning the lost Buddhist civilisation of the Indian subcontinent as the fountainhead of an essentially Asian worldview. With regard to art, this fountainhead was represented for Okakura by the rock-cut meditation halls of Ajanta, whose extensive fresco decorations had been created over a period of 400 years, beginning in the second century BCE. After a visit to the remote site, he described these as ‘the few remaining specimens of a great Indian art, which doubtless, thanks to innumerable travelers, gave its inspiration to the Tang art of China’ (Okakura 54) (Figure 3).

At Jorasanko, the home of the Tagore family who made him their guest in Calcutta, Okakura found that he was preaching to the converted. The painter Abanindranath Tagore, nephew of the great Bengali poet Rabindranath, had already been exploring historical Indian styles in an attempt to revitalise the art of the present. Weary of the volumetric shading and vanishing-point perspective that had characterised the work of the previous generation of Indian painters, he was applying the flat areas of colour and schematic treatment of architecture found in Mughal and Rajput miniatures to his compositions in an attempt to create a new aesthetic. Okakura was excited by this development and subsequently encouraged two of his students, Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunsō, to visit both Ajanta and Jorasanko themselves. The resultant exchange of ideas between the Japanese and Indian artists was highly fruitful; Taikan taught Abanindranath his method of wash-painting, and in turn took home an interest in techniques and motifs derived from historical Indian art.² A student of Abanindranath’s, the future High Modernist painter Mukul Dey visited Taikan in Tokyo in 1916 and was fascinated to examine a painting that reminded him ‘of the beautiful girls of life-size — with flower hair dressing of the type of Ajanta cave paintings’. Observing the Japanese painter’s technique, Dey further noted that ‘it resembled that which was employed in our ancient wall paintings of Ajanta, Bagh and other places’ (Dey np).

The fact that Eric Gill and his friend Jacob Epstein were prepared to make use of Indian artistic conventions in creating London’s first Modernist sculptures demonstrates that a comparable level of intercultural exchange was also beginning to take place among avant-garde thinkers in London. Like Coomaraswamy, Epstein was introduced to Gill by William Rothenstein shortly after his arrival in London and the two sculptors were soon ignoring the Eurocentric narratives encoded into the layout of London’s museums, visiting them specifically to view Indian, rather than Greek, art (Gill, *Diaries*, 22 Mar. and 11 Nov. 1910 np).

The highest profile works to emerge from this refreshing engagement with global culture were Epstein’s controversial

1908–1909 carvings for the façade of the British Medical Association building in London’s exclusive Strand, which are presented in most academic surveys of twentieth-century British art as the city’s earliest Modernist sculptures (Figure 4). As I have pointed out in extensive detail elsewhere, these draw directly not only upon the aesthetics, but also upon the iconography and production techniques of Buddhist, Jain and Hindu temple sculpture (Arrowsmith, *Modernism* and ‘Jacob Epstein’).

Impressed by the precision, physical courage and truth to materials implied by the preference of Indian artists for carving directly in stone, both Gill and Epstein began to eschew the traditional clay modelling techniques used by European academic sculptors in emulation of the classical Greeks, who had now begun to seem distinctly unfashionable. Gill was able to note that Indian temple sculptors had ‘avoided the [clay] model but carved that which they loved and as they loved it. They were clear, clean and hard about everything from the beginning to the end’ (Gill, *Visvakarma* 7). A year and a half after Epstein’s Strand figures had been unveiled, Gill wrote to Rothenstein (who at the time was touring India’s temple sites personally) to say that both he and Epstein had been inspired by photographs of the colossal Jain sculptures cut from the living rock at Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh (Figure 5). ‘We have also had pictures of the carvings at Gwalior that you wrote about’, he told him, ‘some day we will follow in your footsteps and go and see the real things’ (Shewring 36–37).

We may be practically certain that these photographs, not to mention the detailed knowledge of Indian artistic conventions evidenced in the work of the two sculptors, had come to them via Ananda Coomaraswamy. The art historian had been photographing examples of temple sculpture all over India since 1906 and even published the results a few years later as a periodical, with the text penned by none other than Gill himself.³

The creation of a woodcut is also an exercise in direct carving, and Gill’s preference in 1920 for decorating Coomaraswamy’s ‘New England Woods’ with this form of illustration over the rather less ‘clean and hard’ discipline of drawing and acid-etching is directly related to what he was fond of calling his ‘little revolution’ in sculpting technique (Gill, *Autobiography* 162).

The aesthetics of Gill’s illustration for Coomaraswamy are, however, drawn from Indian painting rather than sculpture. The Buddhist frescoes of the Ajanta caves, which Okakura Kakuzō had seen as the foundation of pan-Asian culture, suddenly became more accessible to a Western audience in 1915 thanks to the publication of a lavish new set of colour reproductions by London’s India Society — an organisation that had been founded by Coomaraswamy and Rothenstein five years previously with the objective of improving international awareness of Indian culture. The reproductions themselves were based on watercolour copies made by a group of painters led by Lady Christiana Herringham, a noted restorer of Italian Renaissance frescoes, mainly during the winter of 1910–1911 (Figures 6 and 7). Her

team had been recruited by Coomaraswamy and were all students of Abanindranath Tagore, who by this time was serving as Vice Principal of the Calcutta School of Art. They included Nandalal Bose, later to become one of India’s most important Modernist painters. That winter at the remote and inaccessible caves was a crucial formative experience for Bose as an artist; he would later draw heavily upon the aesthetics and motifs of Ajanta in mature Modernist works such as his frescoes for Santiniketan University near Calcutta, and for those on the walls of the Kirti Mandir in Baroda, Gujarat.

Abanindranath Tagore himself had already attempted to bring the aesthetics of Ajanta into his work, but in a fascinatingly selective way that allows valuable insights into the beginnings of Indian Modernism, while also highlighting a problematic attitude towards historical Indian art that was shared for a long time by Coomaraswamy.

Tapati Guha-Thakurta has pointed out that Abanindranath’s sketchbooks from around 1898 contain a lot of illustrations derived from the caves that seem — ironically enough — to have been derived from a set of copies published by the British artist John Griffiths in the late nineteenth century, rather than from the originals themselves (Guha-Thakurta 235–41). The watercolour *Buddha and Sujata*, completed not long after these sketches, is one of the first finished works by Abanindranath to attempt to incorporate styles and motifs drawn from the frescoes (Figure 8). It illustrates the story of the young woman who brought Gautama Buddha a bowl of milk porridge after he had been fasting for an extended period, assisting his subsequent enlightenment. The same motif is to be found, in carved form, at the entrance to Cave Nineteen at Ajanta, and the background to Abanindranath’s watercolour, with its dense flower and tree details, closely echoes the style of similarly themed paintings on the walls. Also adapted from the frescoes is the wave-like, rhythmic implication of the fingers on the Buddha’s left hand, raised here in the *abhaya mudra* — the gesture of dispelling fear. A sketch from the caves by Lady Herringham’s young English assistant — one Dorothy Larcher — confirms the pedigree of this stylistic point (Figure 9).

Where Abanindranath’s work differs very starkly from Ajanta, however, is in its treatment of sexuality. In the frescoes, male and female figures appear semi-nude and are often depicted in boudoir scenes such as the one in Cave Seventeen that Nandalal Bose copied during the winter of 1910–1911 (Figure 7). Despite the far more risqué treatment of the human form in certain periods of European art, early Western observers, still hung over from the moral conservatism of the Victorian age, found this frank treatment of physical relations between the sexes challenging. British Museum curator Laurence Binyon, the country’s most highly respected authority on Asian art, cited it as a shortcoming of the paintings, preferring instead less organic treatments of the same Buddhist themes from China. ‘The artists of Ajanta are far less at home in the supernatural atmosphere’, he opined in an essay written to accompany the publication of the 1910–1911 copies, ‘where spiritual beings seem to float of their



Figure 4. Photograph of the British Medical Association Headquarters (429 Strand, Westminster), designed by Charles Holden as partner of Adams, Holden & Pearson. Detail shows decorative carvings by Jacob Epstein (now destroyed). 1909. *British Monuments Record*.

own essence' (Binyon 21). It is worth noting in this context that Binyon also kept the Museum's fine collection of Japanese *shunga* – woodblock prints with erotic motifs – under lock and key, and purposefully left it out of his supposedly comprehensive 1916 catalogue.

For the Indian cultural elite of the same period, the situation was equally as complicated. Ingrained sexual inhibitions inherited from the long period of Islamic hegemony in northern India conspired with repressive Judeo-Christian attitudes imposed by the British to ensure that even progressive artists had problems coming to terms with the characterful narratives of feminine identity on display at Ajanta. Women in the frescoes appear fleshy, assertive and physically capable, their faces unguardedly expressive — observing, laughing, questioning. In Abanindranath's depictions, of which *Buddha and Sujata* is a good example, they are by contrast waiflike and submissive, their heads bowed in silent piety. Guha-Thakurta has noted that their attenuated forms hardly seem to be physically present in the compositions at all, and this was a style cue that the conservative William Rothenstein chose to imitate when he sketched with Abanindranath at the Calcutta school in February 1911. 'The Indian artists seem to like my drawings very much and to be surprised to find them so much more like their own than they expected', he wrote to his wife, probably after comparing some of Abanindranath's compositions with Calcutta drawings of his own such as the *Woman Offering Puja* (10) (Rothenstein, Letter to A Rothenstein, np).

For a long time, Coomaraswamy was also uncomfortable with the sexual aspects of historical Indian art, despite his familiarity with some of the most erotic pieces available. Coomaraswamy was in Calcutta at the same time as William Rothenstein and invited him on a trip south to examine and photograph Konark temple near Puri on the Bay of Bengal. Konark is famous for its intricate thirteenth-century carvings illustrating the principles of Tantra, an esoteric Hindu-Buddhist cult that stresses the importance of formalised sexual acts as a route towards spiritual enlightenment. He had also previously advised the artist to drop by the Khajuraho temple site during a stay in Chhatarpur in Madhya Pradesh a few weeks previously.⁴ Carvings at both these two sites illustrate every conceivable position of sexual union between men and women, with some featuring three or more participants (Figure 11). Despite his familiarity with such work, however, Coomaraswamy tiptoed around the subject of eroticism in his published writings of the time, stating in his 1908 volume on *The Aims of Indian Art* that such themes were present only in order 'to suggest the eternal and inexpressible infinities in terms of sensuous beauty' (10). He added two years later

The Western view of sex is degraded and material compared with the Eastern, women are not lightly spoken of, or written of, in the East as they are so often in the West. (Coomaraswamy, *The Oriental View of Woman* 22)



Figure 5. Colossal reliefs at Gwalior depicting Jain Tirthankaras. Fifteenth century CE. Sandstone. 10 m high. In situ. Author's photograph.

Art historian Partha Mitter has criticised such coyness in his recent survey volume on Indian art, pointing out that it 'is belied by numerous [Hindu] religious hymns which graphically describe the physical beauty of the goddesses' (Mitter 76).

Eric Gill would certainly have agreed that art with a spiritual theme need not divorce itself from overt references to physical sex. He asked in the pages of the Calcutta magazine, *Rupam*,

If the trees and rocks, the thunder and the sea, the frightful avidity of animal life and the loveliness of flowers are so many hints of the God who made them,

how much more obviously are the things of humanity analogues of the things of God? [...] and among all such things, the union of man and woman takes the highest place and is the most potent symbol [...] the more the divine background disappears, the more the prudishness of the police becomes the standard of ethics and aesthetics alike. (Gill, 'Art and Love' 5)

The opinions of Gill, which were also shared by Jacob Epstein, represent one of the two factors that would eventually reconcile Coomaraswamy to the erotic aspects of Indian culture. Both Gill and Epstein were quick to perceive that the

solidly heterosexual character of Indian art contrasted usefully with the homoerotic preoccupations of Greek classicism, and that to emulate it would allow them to step still further outside the stagnant provincial margins of European academic sculpture. There can be no doubt at all that Epstein's famous erotic drawing from 1911, *One of the Hundred Pillars of the Secret Temple*, was inspired directly by photographs of Khajuraho or Konark, almost certainly from Coomaraswamy's collection.⁵ At the same time, Gill created a sculpture that he named simply *Fucking* in the pages of his diary, depicting his sister and her husband having sex in a similar standing position to those common in Tantric art. Even as late as 1982, the Tate was uncomfortable with Gill's original title, changing it to *Ecstasy* upon purchasing the piece more than twenty years after the sculptor's death. Gill's woodcut for Coomaraswamy's 'New England Woods' follows a similar transcultural approach, transposing a figure that is clearly inspired by the Ajanta frescoes into a temperate Northern landscape of birch trees in much the same way that the poem itself does.

But the figure in the poem and the woodcut also represent a real dancer, and it is her story that completes the jigsaw puzzle of 'New England Woods'. Despite his argument that people of the Indian subcontinent owed no military service obligations to their colonial occupiers, there had been repeated and insistent attempts by the British government to send Coomaraswamy to the trenches; in the end the only escape had been exile. After a period of uncertainty with regard to his residency status in the United States, he managed to get a curatorship in the Asian section of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts where Okakura Kakuzō had also worked from 1904 until his death in 1913, and began to share his time between that city and New York. It was in New York that he met the young dancer Stella Bloch, who would shortly afterwards become famous as the first American member of Isadora Duncan's protégé group, The Isadorables. Their relationship developed speedily. Stella was intrigued by Coomaraswamy's knowledge of the highly disciplined Asian dance traditions that she had begun to think might offer Western performers an alternative to the rather unstructured routines developed by Duncan, while Coomaraswamy found himself captivated by a woman he perceived with increasing conviction to be a living artwork from the Ajanta caves (see front cover). He told her in a letter that has never before been published:

It often impresses me how exactly you exemplify some of the classical similes of Indian poetry such as, arms like the stalk of a water lily, hands like the lotus flowers, hair like a black snake (hanging in one line, not falling loose), and sidelong glances like arrows . . . I've been looking at your photographs and thinking these things. (Letter from Coomaraswamy to Bloch, 19 Nov. 1917 np)

The clues that conclusively link Stella to the 'white fawn' who 'flits unclad' through the stanzas of 'New England Woods' are to be found in the mode of address and the imagery used by

Coomaraswamy in these letters. Here, he refers to her consistently as 'my little fawn' and is given to visualising her dancing in a wooded environment. Coomaraswamy often vacationed alone in a forest lodge up in Waldoboro, Maine – a place he nicknamed 'The Brocken' after a haunted mountain in Germany – and it was there that his thoughts about Stella coalesced into poetry. He told her during a stay there during the late summer of 1917

Every now and then it seems as though you must be flitting around up here, as I wish you were visibly and tangibly, you have seemed to haunt the Brocken: and when I was at the bathing pool today I imagined a nymph whose likeness you know very well. (Letter from Coomaraswamy to Bloch, prob. Sept. 1917 np)

The following summer he was there again and was able to describe himself in the renewed grip of such imaginings. He wrote to her then, his use of the third person perhaps betraying his discomfort at committing such intimacies to paper.

He did not think of anyone but Stella, he did not even wish she were with him, for he could not be nearer to her than this. Every movement of the trees and flowers and the uncut grass seemed akin to laughter and tears. He realized that the asylum of the forest – of which he had often thought with prevision of destiny – is the ultimate home of man . . . None but the pines could watch his thoughts: and all the love that had been given him so freely flowed back again into his heart more warmly and more poignantly than a caress. (Letter from Coomaraswamy to Bloch, 13 July 1918 np)

A desire to caress Stella in a distinctly unspiritual way had preoccupied Coomaraswamy for the majority of the two years leading up to the composition of the poem, but the young dancer had not often been prepared to reciprocate. He writes in frustration in one letter

I don't want to coax you to do anything you do not really feel or wish to do. But it forms a sort of deadlock in the evolution of our pattern if I must not – by agreement – caress you: because that is the natural expression of my feeling towards you. (Letter from Coomaraswamy to Bloch, 22 Oct. 1917 np)

In another he tells her,

I wish to have as much patience as you desire . . . I long to caress you and sometimes allow myself to think that you long to be caressed – but it may be that you only permit it. (Letter from Coomaraswamy to Bloch, 17 Nov. 1917 np)

This resistance of Stella's with regard to physical intimacy is clearly what makes the 'flitting fawn' of 'New England Woods'



Figure 6. Copy of a painting in Cave 1 at Ajanta depicting a Bodhisattva, by Lady Christiana Herringham. 1910–11. Tempera. Lost.

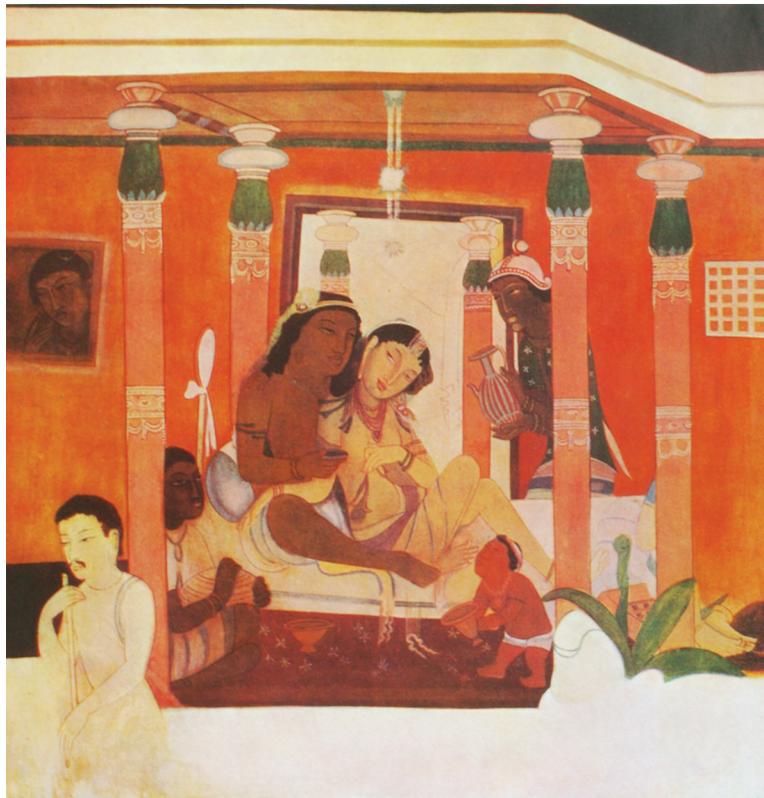


Figure 7. Copy of a painting from Cave 17 at Ajanta depicting a palace scene, by Nandalal Bose. 1910–11. Watercolour. Lost.



Figure 8. Buddha and Sujata by Abanindranath Tagore. 1901. Chromolithograph. 25 × 19 cm. Private collection.



Figure 9. Tracing of a painting from Cave 18 at Ajanta depicting a scene from the Visvantara Jataka, by Dorothy Larcher. 1910–11. Charcoal. Lost.

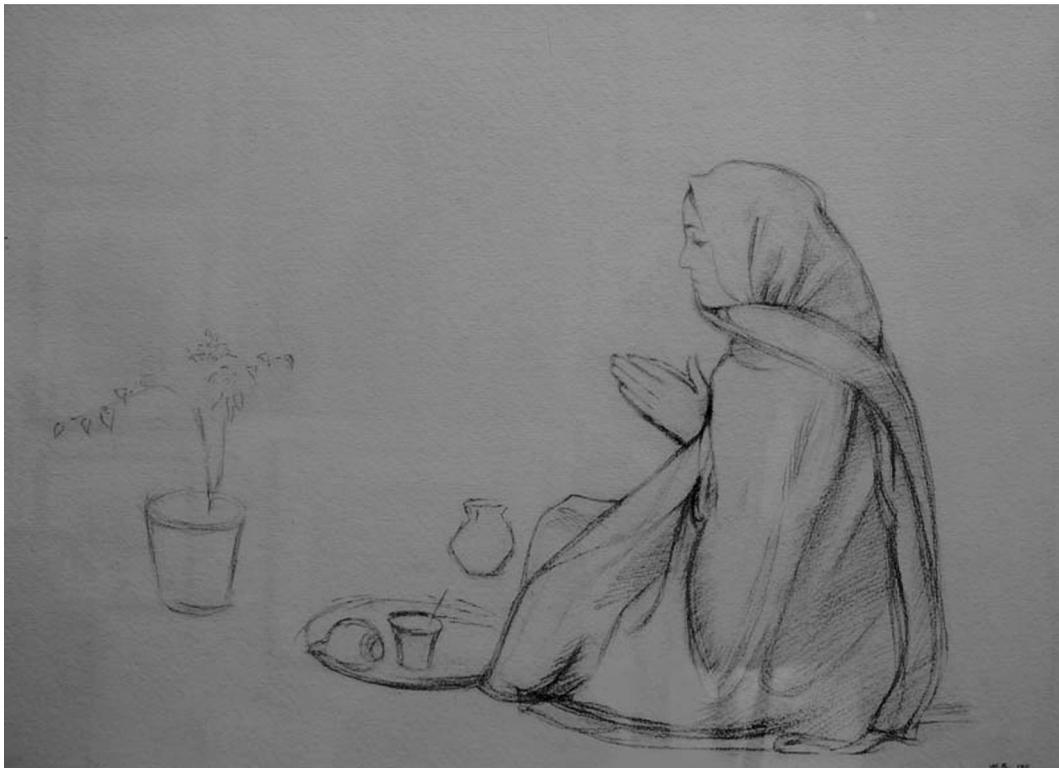


Figure 10. Woman Offering Puja by William Rothenstein. 1911. Pencil, 30 × 26 cm. Abbott and Holder, London.



Figure 11. Tantric group at Vishwanath Temple, Khajuraho. Eleventh century CE. Sandstone. In situ. Author's photograph.

encourage the poet to exercise a form of Buddhist detachment. 'Be still', she tells him, adding that he must not desire her body to any greater degree than he desires the natural landscape to which she belongs.

Within a year, however, Stella had agreed to go with Coomaraswamy on a long research trip to southern and eastern Asia, and would finally marry him in 1922. Arriving at the court of King Pakubuwono X in what is now Surakarta in present-day Indonesia, she became fascinated by the *Bedhaya* dances of Central Java – a tradition traceable to Ajanta via the Hindu–Buddhist civilisation of Mataram that had flourished in that region between the eighth and tenth centuries CE – and remained at the court for more than a year to study them. The dances have been ascribed a Tantric significance by many authorities, with their movements considered to represent a formalised dialogue between the intellect and sexual desire (Hadiwidjojo 18–21). Whereas classical Greek art takes the body of the male athlete as its key motif, that of classical India bases itself on the form and posture of the female temple dancer. The key significance of Hindu–Buddhist dance, along with Coomaraswamy's very personal interest in its most recent interpreter, provide the final factor in reconciling him to the overtly sexual character of much traditional art from the subcontinent. Not long after his return to Boston, he was able to concede that

there is scarcely any female figure represented in early Indian art without erotic suggestion of some kind implied, or explicitly expressed and emphasised; nowhere, indeed, has the vegetative sexual motif been presented with greater frankness and or transparency. (Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* 64)

Stella Bloch, back from Java and performing *Bedhaya* routines off Broadway and as a headline act at the Eastman Theatre in Rochester, must have seemed to Coomaraswamy an embodiment of the eclectic global aesthetic he had been promoting since his move to London a decade and a half previously. Just as Eric Gill and Jacob Epstein had abandoned the Greek tradition in sculpture in favour of Indian, Near Eastern and eventually African conventions, Bloch was adapting Hindu–Buddhist performances to the polyglot culture of an emerging civilisation on a new continent. The Ajanta dancer who flits through the windswept birches of New England in Gill's woodcut and iterates her Buddhist message across the empty, snowy landscape in Coomaraswamy's poem, may be taken then to represent the ultimate Western extension of a cultural wave that began in Calcutta and Tokyo at the *fin de siècle*, then spread to Europe and the United States, establishing in the process the transcultural

characteristics that would define twentieth-century culture at a world level.

An early version of this essay was given as a talk at the Convocation House of the Bodleian Library, Oxford in March 2010 as part of the Indian Traces event organised by Elleke Boehmer in collaboration with the AHRC-funded research project on 'Making Britain', led by Susheila Nasta. I would like to thank them both for their interest in the material. The talk is now available as a podcast from the Oxford University website (<<http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/>>). I would also like to thank Partha Mitter for his advice on Abanindranath Tagore and on eroticism in pre-Mughal Indian art.

Notes

- 1 The poem was initially published in 1919 in the New York literary magazine *The Modern School* opposite an essay on aesthetics by Stella Bloch titled 'Intuitions'.
- 2 For the definitive account of Taikan's visit, see P Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994). Also T Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art – Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal c. 1850–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992); and R Parimoo, ed, *The Art of Ajanta – New Perspectives*, 2 vols (New Delhi: Books & Books, 1991), especially R Chattopadhyay, 'The Artistic Discovery of Ajanta and the Nationalist Artist in Bengal' I: 42–51.
- 3 The periodical was titled *Visvakarma*. Eight issues were published between 1912 and 1914.
- 4 Rothenstein wrote to his wife from Puri that 'the temples, not unlike those at Kajuraho; Chhatarpur, are the grandest and noblest I have yet seen. I am just about worn out with seeing beautiful places'. 13 Feb. 1911 (Tate Gallery Archive, uncatalogued).
- 5 Epstein's *One of the Hundred Pillars of the Secret Temple* is currently in the private collection of Mark Glatman. It featured in the 2009 exhibition 'Wild Thing' at London's Royal Academy and is illustrated in my own *Modernism and the Museum: Asian, African and Pacific Art and the London Avant Garde* on page 81 (Figure 19).

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