CHAPTER III: INDIAN ART AND NATIONALISM IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Introduction:

This chapter is dedicated to the analysis of sculptural artefacts framed as Indian Art, a frame that was annexed for the objects of study in the polemical writings of nationalist art historians like E. B. Havell, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, Sister Nivedita, Abanindranath Tagore and other prominent cultural figures of the early twentieth century. The discourses surrounding the emergence of pre-modern Indian Art as a national, spiritualized entity – encompassing the ‘Fine Arts’ triumvirate of Architecture, Sculpture and Painting – was a paradigmatic moment in the historiography of Indian art and the impact of this shift continues to influence the discipline today. Despite the recent post-colonial critiques of colonialist and nationalist art history, the different subject-positions that historians of pre-modern Indian art can occupy in relation to their objects of study continue to be somewhat influenced by the two epistemological legacies – the objectivist legacy of colonialist epistemology and the idealist formulations of the nationalist writers.

The major portion of this chapter focuses on the Idealist construction of Indian Art at the confluence of Nation and Spirit – a construct which was developed in the writings of Havell and Coomaraswamy in the first quarter of the 20th century. The latter scholar’s wide-ranging hermeneutic ‘recoveries’ seek to create meaning on sites where ‘higher’ or ‘deeper meaning’ was hitherto absent. I attempt to visualize Coomaraswamy’s framing of Indian Art and the values it accumulates through his writing. I also examine the relationship of Coomaraswamy’s objects to history and how this differs from colonial version. Finally, I speculate on the inflexions that the visuality and the material presence of art objects undergo within Coomaraswamy’s Idealist frame.

In the second section, I briefly examine the writings of Stella Kramrisch who, though she was deeply influenced by Coomaraswamy’s idealist-metaphysical approach to Indian art, brought a slightly different set of insights to our
understanding of Indian art, particularly Indian sculpture. Kramrisch’s remarkable sensitivity to the formal/material qualities of the art object and the centrality of history to her formal-stylistic analysis are aspects that set her contributions apart from those of other nationalist art historians. I undertake a close reading of a few texts in Kramrisch’s oeuvre to examine how the scholar interweaves history and stylistic change and how she frames the visual and material qualities of the objects of study.

SECTION I: THE IDEALIST-METAPHYSICAL ART HISTORY OF HAVELL AND COMARASWAMY

Background:

While chairing the Indian Section of the annual meeting of the Royal Society of Arts in 1910, Sir George Birdwood, the champion of Indian Industrial arts, triggered a controversy that was to consolidate a completely new frame for understanding Indian art. Declaring that there was no "fine art" in India, he dismissed the 'higher' artistic value of a particular Javanese bronze Buddha sculpture that was introduced into the discussion. “The senseless similitude, by its immemorial fixed pose, is nothing more than an uninspired brazen image, vacuously squinting down its nose to its thumbs, knees and toes. A boiled suet pudding would serve equally well as a symbol of passionate purity and serenity of the soul.”1 In response to this intemperate statement, a group of prominent English artists and intellectuals including Laurence Housman, Walter Crane, William Rothenstein, wrote a letter to The Times of February 28, 1910, stating:

We the undersigned artists, critics and students of art...find in the best art of India a lofty and adequate expression of the religious emotion of the people and of their deepest thoughts on the subject of the divine. We recognize in the Buddha type of sacred figure one of the greatest artistic inspirations of the world....We trust that...it will jealously preserve its individual character which is an outgrowth of the history and physical conditions of the country, as well as of

those ancient and profound religious conceptions which are the
glory of India and of all the Eastern world.\(^2\)

The significance of this widely publicized exchange lies in the fact that it was
the first internationally recognized challenge to the official colonialist
interpretation of Indian Art. It demarcated and fortified the platform on which
the new idealist interpretation of Indian Art would stage its appearance, soon
to become part of India’s struggle for self determination and nationhood. This
alternative frame, which linked the key concepts of ‘spirituality’, ‘tradition’
and ‘nationhood’ with Indian art, took shape in the writings and practices of
nationalist intellectuals and cultural revivalists like E.B.Havell, Abanindranath
and Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh, Sister Nivedita and Ananda
Coomaraswamy. By the 1930’s, the idealist interpretation of Indian Art had
gained considerable ground, successfully de-centering colonial Eurocentric
aesthetics and the archaeological approach to pre-modern Indian Art, which
had so far enjoyed hegemonic status.\(^3\)

**Indian art in the Idealist frame:**

The basic tenets of the idealist interpretation of Indian Art may be
summarized as follows. The idealist-nationalist art historical project launched
a two-pronged attack against colonialist discourses and institutional practices
with respect to Indian art. On the one hand, it criticized the near-sightedness
and commercialism of British policies for engendering the decline of arts and
crafts in the country. On the other, it rejected the ‘archaeological’ approach
of the official colonialist discourse in its interpretation of ancient Indian Art.
Havell and Coomaraswamy offered their alternative idealist-aesthetic
interpretation of Indian Art as a way of looking at Indian art from ‘an Indian
point of view’.

Indian Art in its new definition encompassed the Western triad of Fine Arts –
arquitecture, sculpture and painting. Havell, Coomaraswamy, Kramrisch and
other scholars made significant contributions towards the study and

\(^2\)Quoted in Smith, *A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon, from the Earliest Times to the

\(^3\)The second edition of Smith’s *A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon*, published in 1930,
displays several symptoms of the retreat of the colonialist version of Indian art history. The
book was revised extensively by K de B Codrington – who strategically omits sections of the
‘aesthetic’ commentary through which Smith sought to establish the non-fine art status of
much of pre-modern Indian Art.
theorizing of Indian painting, which, with the exception of Ajanta, had been left out of the colonial account. One vital thrust of redefining and expanding the canon of Indian Art was to establish the Fine Art status of a large selection of ‘masterpieces’ from the past. The new Indian Art was uniquely and organically linked to the soil of the subcontinent in its origins and development. Colonialist ideology dictated that ‘foreign origins’ and ‘foreign influence’ be used to account for all artistic innovation and aesthetic excellence in Indian art. Not content with disputing these claims of foreign influence on the basis of historical evidence and ideological-aesthetic claims, the nationalist art historians invented the concept of a ‘Greater India’, locating post-Gupta India as the epicentre of a cultural revolution that reverberated across several regions of Asia. Further, they rendered the whole discussion around foreign influences invalid by asserting the unified Idealist ‘essence’ of Indian Art. According to Havell, “Indian art is essentially idealistic, mystic, symbolic, and transcendental.”

All material manifestations of Indian art through the ages, according to this construct, were embodiments of a single set of primordial Ideas, or Ideals. For Havell, Vedic and Upanishadic thought provided the philosophical basis and the creative force that powered Indian artistic expression throughout its history. Coomaraswamy identified Philosophia Perrenis, which he equated with sanatana dharma, as the source of the doctrines and ideals of Indian, Oriental and even Mediaeval Christian Art. According to Coomaraswamy, “…just as through all Indian schools of thought there runs like a golden thread the fundamental idealism of the Upanishads, the Vedanta, so in all Indian art there is a unity that underlies all its bewildering variety. This unifying principle is here also Idealism, and this must of necessity have been so, for the synthesis of Indian thought is one, not many.” The organic connections between the Indian Nation with its Art and its History were drawn, for the first time, along these lines: India was united by these Ideals, which also underpinned its Art. These Ideals originated in the nation’s hoary past, in almost mythical time and were valid for all time.

4 E. B. Havell, Indian Sculpture and Painting, Illustrated by Typical Masterpieces, with an Explanation of Their Motives and Ideals (London, J. Murray, 1908), 10.
The idealist frame served several important ideological functions that were central to the nationalist struggle. It served to imagine a ‘nation’ into being, the nation as a unified entity, defined by its common ideals, rather than by its all-too real social, economic, religious, cultural differences, hierarchies and incompatibilities. It defined ‘spiritual’ and ‘traditional’ India as different from the ‘materialistic’ and ‘modern’ West – which is why, according to Havell, Indian art appeared anomalous and inscrutable to Western eyes. “The spirituality of Indian art permeates the whole of it, but it shines brightest at the point where we cease to see and understand it.”6 Most importantly, the stress on the unity of ideals made it possible to theorize a continuity of great art in India, a ‘tradition’ originating in its ancient past, surviving in an abstract realm even through the troubled present, to emerge materially again in the renaissance of the future. To theorize a continuing national ‘tradition’ of great art was an ideological imperative for nationalist art historians, developed in response to the official colonialist argument that ‘fine arts’ in India was either unknown or dead by the beginning of the Gupta period. According to Coomaraswamy, “[t]he people to whom the great conceptions came are still the Indian people, and, when life is strong in them again, strong also will be their art.”7

**Idealist Art History – A critique**

Both Havell and Coomaraswamy began their art history careers as champions of native craftsmanship, criticizing imperial policies and neglect for the deteriorating state of craft traditions in India and Ceylon.8 By the second decade of the 20th century however, the focus of their critique shifted away from the ground realities of living craft practices towards the more conceptual ‘fine arts’ debate, with its civilizational implications for India. In a strategically significant move, the nationalist scholars commandeered the distinctively modern-Western category of ‘fine art’ as a frame within which to recast and unify a large corpus of artefactual production found within the subcontinent which had previously been fragmented under several colonialist

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categories – historical monuments, archaeological and ethnological artefacts, ornamental or decorative arts. In appropriating the fine arts frame and adopting its generic triad of architecture-sculpture-painting as the basic analytic categories in their writing, the nationalist scholars engendered a disciplinary paradox that continues to haunt the practice of art history in India. Even while they strenuously refuted the validity of the ‘fine art’ vs. ‘lesser art/craft’ divide in the context of India, Havell and Coomaraswamy ended up valorizing what we now recognize as the ‘high tradition’ of Indian art at the expense of various folk and popular art and craft manifestations with somewhat ambiguous social and historical pedigree, even though some of these were living art practices.

The nationalist redefinition of Indian or ‘traditional’ art both participated in and differed from, the modern Western construction in other important ways

1) The notion of art-making as a more or less autotelic activity and the artwork as an autonomous entity were an important motive force behind modernist experiments. Havell and Coomaraswamy rejected the notion of ‘art for art’s sake’, insisting that ‘traditional art’ was always a means to an end, never an end in itself, the ends being both physical and spiritual in varying degrees.\(^9\)

2) The modernist cult of the artist, the artist as a free-thinker and creative genius, expressing his emotions, individuality and originality through his art work was similarly rejected in favour of a conception of the artist as a functional member of society, a skilled worker catering to specific needs of his community, embodying in material form the collective vision of his people. “The artist did not think of his art as a “self-expression,” nor was the patron interested in his personality or biography.”\(^10\)

3) At the level of reception, even while it challenged accepted definitions of the aesthetic, modernist art was inextricably bound up with notions of aesthetics, aesthetic experience and aesthetic judgment. Exploiting the unstable state of ‘Universal aesthetics’ in the early twentieth century, the nationalists erected an alternative aesthetic frame for Indian art. It was


\(^10\)“The Nature of Mediaeval Art,” ibid., 112.
something of an irony that Coomaraswamy, despite his unrivalled success in aestheticizing the Indian art object on the international arena, rejected the aesthetic approach to Indian art as being too subjective and ‘sentimental’. ‘Traditional’ works of art, according to the scholar, “were not produced for the delectation of the senses” but were geared to higher rational and spiritual ends.\textsuperscript{11}

By constructing a spiritual and idealist ‘essence’ for Indian art, the nationalist scholars signaled a parting of ways with the official Western definition of fine art. Faced with the imperative of authenticating this construct, which also implied affirming its ancient origins and transhistorical validity, nationalist scholars selected figurative sculpture in stone and bronze as their exemplary object lesson. Both Havell and Coomaraswamy dedicate several texts to the apotheosizing of Indian sculpture, a category replete with ‘masterpieces’ exemplifying the ‘ideals of Indian art’.\textsuperscript{12}

Indian figurative sculpture was eminently suited to demonstrating the primordial (Buddhist/Brahminical) ideal and spiritual ‘essence’ of Indian art in a way that craft traditions such as textiles and ceramics, for example, were not. It provided an aestheticized alternative to the colonialist focus on architecture, which was archaeological and objectivist in its approach. The nationalist scholars could claim for this category of art an unbroken ‘tradition’ that spanned over two millennia. This time frame would be extended backwards to the Vedic period, when the ‘ideals’ that motivated Indian sculpture were supposedly formulated, thus diminishing the significance of the foreign-influenced refinements of the Mauryan sculpture. Indian figurative sculpture could then be read as a progressive realization, in gross materials, of Vedic ideals (read the nation’s spirit), which reached its culmination in the redefined ‘Golden Age’ of Indian art. De-centering the colonialist version of the Golden Age of Indian art, predictably located in the Gandhara time-space, the idealist art historians of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century invented a new Golden Age, a ‘Classic period’ of Indian art from the 6\textsuperscript{th} to 8\textsuperscript{th} centuries. It was not coincidental that this period corresponded with the so-

\textsuperscript{11}“Why Exhibit Works of Art?” ibid., 16–17.
\textsuperscript{12} Sculpture in bronze and stone is the focus of Havell, \textit{Ideals of Indian Art} (New York, Dutton, 1912) and \textit{Indian Sculpture and Painting, Illustrated by Typical Masterpieces, with an Explanation of Their Motives and Ideals}; Coomaraswamy, \textit{Visvakarma; Examples of Indian Architecture, Sculpture, Painting, Handicraft} (London: Messrs. Luzac; 1914).
called ‘Hindu Renaissance’ in large parts of India.\textsuperscript{13} The figurative sculpture of this period became the touchstone for all Indian Art, the point at which the archetypal Ideal reached its culmination in material form. The politics and normative implications of this new ‘golden age’ have been critiqued by recent scholars; it however continues to determine the focus of museum displays and long surveys of Indian Art.\textsuperscript{14}

**Idealism and the Dematerialization of Art**

Because they tended to view Indian art entirely in terms of the transcendental ideas it embodied and the archetypal, abstract Ideal Forms that determined its diverse manifestations, nationalist writers tended to gloss over the physical, non-representational attributes of the works of art. In the writings of Coomaraswamy and Havell, traditional works of art are consistently viewed as means to higher ‘spiritual’ ends. One implication of this redefinition of art was that the metaphysical and symbolic signified was given epistemological priority over material/visual qualities of the signifier. Even as it challenged the realist epistemology of the colonial archaeological frame, the idealist discourse perpetuated the divide between form and meaning; here, however, the values were reversed with metaphysical essence subordinating phenomenal appearance.

As a consequence of this emphasis on the metaphysical qualities of Indian art over its varied physical manifestations, art works were de-materialized within idealist epistemology. When art works are interpreted and understood entirely in terms of a single set of universal ideas and values that they are supposed to embody and manifest, they become enclosed within a rarified, circular, symbolic sphere, reduced to the level of illustrations in the service of some transcendental logos. At work here is idealism at two levels. At the first level, the idealist interpretation of meaning supports the theory that meaning is an \textit{a priori} that both chronologically and causally precedes the embodiment of meaning in form. The meaning of an art work is framed as transcendental


‘given’, pre-existing its representation in material form, originating ultimately in primordial Revelation outside historical time. Meaning is ‘discovered’ or ‘realized’ by the artist, his patron and the viewer, never constructed or negotiated within the social realm. Compounding this transcendentalist approach to meaning, the idealist interpretation of form inserts a complete mental image, an Ideal Form or Archetype, between meaning/Idea and its embodiment in material form.\(^\text{15}\) According to the idealist reading therefore, the material specificities of the work have only a tertiary status on the scale of epistemological value.

The epistemological priority given to meaning and content is everywhere evident in Coomaraswamy’s writing. In one of his Boston catalogues, the scholar is careful to distinguish between the ‘ultimate content’ of a work of art, its metaphysical import, to be understood intuitively, and its formal ‘subject’, relating to its iconography. In this text, Coomaraswamy purports to consider the work of art ‘mainly from the standpoint of the bhakta or worshipper’, the standpoint of ‘their original usage’. However, he also takes on the task of “referring incidentally to matters of related historical interest, such as details of costume, stance, and so forth, and to the technical methods of the craft.” This division of art writing into ‘ultimate content’ (metaphysical significance), formal ‘subject’ (meaning related to iconography and representation), ‘incidental details of historical interest’ (formal/stylistic description and analysis) and ‘technical methods’ (facture) is maintained in most of Coomaraswamy’s writing on Indian art.\(^\text{16}\)

Significantly, there is a distinct hierarchy implied in this approach. Coomaraswamy’s writings are replete with sophisticated interpretations of art works in terms of transcendental Idea, symbolism and iconography. By contrast, his analysis of the formal/stylistic aspects of specific works, their material qualities and the technical processes involved, are brusque and rudimentary, and (if we read past the Sanskrit terminology) bear a striking stylistic resemblance to objectivist descriptions in colonial archaeological texts. If we were to map Coomaraswamy’s reception of art works in terms of

\(^{15}\)In his article “Is Art a Superstition, or a Way of Life?”, Coomaraswamy writes “Art can…be defined as the embodiment in material of a pre-conceived form.” Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art, 1956, 69.

proximity and distance, it becomes clear that even as he signals his proximity to the metaphysical ideas and representational aspects of his objects, he distances himself from their physical, non-representational, materially significant and expressive qualities, their ‘presence effects’. One has only to compare Coomaraswamy’s texts with some of the writings of his younger contemporary, Stella Kramrisch, to perceive the disembodied and clinically detached nature of Coomaraswamy’s response to the non-representational, visual and haptic qualities of the works he describes. Whether this distancing from the presence effects of the works was a conscious, ideologically determined choice or whether it was a psychological idiosyncracy, it is difficult to say. The former is a definite possibility. Coomaraswamy repeatedly dismisses the aesthetic/sentimental approach to art, arguing that through its ‘intelligibility and functional efficacy’, true/traditional art appeals ultimately to reason and not to the senses.17 “The recognition of beauty depends on judgement, not on sensation; the beauty of the aesthetic surfaces depending on their information, and not upon themselves.”18

Coomaraswamy is in his element when he can ‘read’ paintings and sculptures as if they were written texts.19 In his numerous descriptions of artworks, especially in his catalogues and journal articles as a Museum curator and keeper, we sense an inexplicable urgency that drives the translation of the visible into the legible. Left decisively out of the account is an entire material-visual dimension of the work, non-representational, yet powerfully affective; what Georges Didi-Huberman distinguishes as its visual aspect.

In his book Confronting Images, Georges Didi-Huberman makes an interesting distinction between the visible and the visual in a work of art.20 Visible elements, according to the scholar, are decipherable aspects of the work, elements of representation and signification which provide a key to ‘translating’ the artwork – rendering it legible, like a written text. Visual elements, on the other hand, are neither visible in the sense of ‘representing’

18Ibid., 75.
19This section is adapted from my paper, “The Visual and the Material in Coomaraswamy’s Art History”, presented at the seminar on the aesthetic philosophy of Ananda Coomaraswamy, University of Hyderabad, February 2011.
something definite and meaningful, nor are they invisible, that is to say the abstract, literally ‘meta-physical’, the out-of-the-frame dimension of the work. The visual, as this scholar formulates it, is the powerful ‘appearance’ or ‘presence’ of an art work, an efficacious quality that exceeds the representational, the legible dimension. ‘Massive and deployed’, the visual reaches out and implicates “the gaze of a subject, its history, its fantasies, its internal divisions.” According to Didi-Huberman, encountering the visual dimension in a work requires,

...a gaze that would not draw close only to discern and recognize, to name what it grasps at any cost—but would, first, distance itself a bit and abstain from clarifying everything immediately. Something like a suspended attention, a prolonged suspension of the moment of reaching conclusions....

There would also be, in this alternative, a dialectical moment—surely unthinkable in positivist terms—consisting of not-grasping the image, of letting oneself be grasped by it instead: thus of letting go of one’s knowledge about it.”

If one can hazard an inference from his writings, such an approach would have been equally unthinkable for anti-positivist Coomaraswamy, for a number of reasons quite consistent with his approach to art and aesthetics.

**Art-Making within the Idealist frame**

The idealist frame’s epistemological dematerialization of the art work goes beyond its reduction of the act of reception to a disembodied, intellectual operation, a passive absorption of the representational import of the artwork. It extends to its problematic characterization of *art-making*, sometimes diminishing the process of making an artwork to the level of a skilled operation, sometimes elevating it to the status of an intellectual exercise. On the one hand, the individual contribution of the artist/craftsman to the material emergence of the art work is reduced to a skilled operation, because within the idealist frame, the final, material forms of the art works are themselves pre-determined by Tradition, in the realm of Idea and archetypal Form. According to Coomaraswamy, “…the nature of ideas to be expressed in

21 Ibid., 16.
art is pre-determined by a traditional doctrine, ultimately of superhuman origin, and through the authority of which the necessity of a clear and repeated expression of such and such ideas has come to be accepted without question”22. The craftsman, therefore, “is not an individual expressing individual whims, but a part of the universe, giving expression to ideals of eternal beauty and unchanging laws...”23

Coomaraswamy simultaneously frames artmaking as an intellectual exercise, a form of knowledge. Art in traditional societies, according to Coomaraswamy, is in the first place “the property of the artist, a kind of knowledge and skill by which he knows, not what ought to be made, but how to imagine the form of a thing that is to be made, and how to embody this form in suitable material, so that the resulting artifact can be used.”24 The emphasis here is on knowledge; art-making is first of all a cognitive, intellectual operation, and only secondarily and less importantly, material practice. How can these two frames – art-making as skill deployed in the service of pre-existing doctrinal ideas, and art-making as an intellectual operation, be reconciled within the same larger argument?

Coomaraswamy cleverly resolves this paradox by simply subverting or inverting the Western distinction between ‘fine arts’ and ‘crafts’. Coomaraswamy divides the traditional artist’s operation into two phases, with obvious hierarchical connotations. The “free” theoretical or imaginative act of conceiving the mental vision (a divinely ordained, textually prescribed, collectively shared, Ideal Form) of the thing to be made is followed by the “servile” manual act of transcribing this into material form.25 Missing from the account is an array of considerations – the resistance offered by material, the deployment of technology, the process, the conception of art-making as learnt and embodied knowledge as well as practice, and most importantly art-making as the locus of a generative performance.

Even function, which Coomaraswamy stresses as central to our understanding of art, is relegated to a purely cognitive realm. On the one

hand, “functional and symbolic values coincide”\(^{26}\) and function and meaning are inseparable;\(^{27}\) on the other, function is ultimately subservient to a ‘higher’ symbolic meaning. “Whatever work of traditional art we consider… [had] a meaning over and above what may be called the immediate value of the object to us as a source of pleasure or necessity of life.”\(^{28}\) Coomaraswamy articulates the connection between the meaning and function of a work of art in these terms: “…whatever, and however humble, the functional purpose of a work of art may have been, it always has a spiritual meaning, but one that the function itself expresses adequately by analogy [emphasis added].”\(^{29}\)

**The De-historicizing of Artworks**

The logocentric straightjacket of ‘unity’ at the level of Idea also resulted in the *de-historicizing* of art works. Within the idealist frame, the irreconcilable diversity of artistic production across the subcontinent, varying most obviously according to time-period, region and cultural context, is merely epiphenomenal. The vital links between art works and the specific historical, cultural and material circumstances of their production and reception are less important than the links between art works and the trans-historical Idea. For Coomaraswamy, ‘style and stylistic sequences’ are the accident, not the essence of art, a product of ‘human idiosyncracy[sic].’\(^{30}\) “We conceive… that the most significant element in any given work of art is precisely that aspect of it which may, and often does, persist unchanged throughout millennia and in widely separated areas; and the least significant, those accidental variations of style by which we are enabled to date a given work or even in some cases to attribute it to an individual artist.”\(^{31}\)

The quotation above suggests the scholar’s focus of interest was not individual art works at all but generic or ideal types – like the Nataraja type and the Buddha type. Given this approach, it is not surprising that Coomaraswamy was impatient with the formal attributes that marked individual art works as both unique and part of a larger sequence. What is

\(^{26}\) “Is Art A Superstition?”, 79.
\(^{27}\) “Why Exhibit Works of Art?”, 40.
\(^{28}\) “Is Art a Superstition?” 78.
\(^{29}\) “Why Exhibit Works of Art?” 40.
surprising, however, is that this lack of interest in historical specifics extended to the scholar’s approach to the content and meaning of art works as well. In a recent article on the shifting meanings of the Nataraja icon, Padma Kaimal challenges Coomaraswamy’s authoritative interpretation of the familiar Chola bronze Nataraja image on multiple counts. Most relevant here is her charge that Coomaraswamy’s hermeneutic ‘recovery’ was based on the assumption that the icon had one original, static meaning that remained fixed throughout its thousand-year-long history. Drawing on inscriptional and visual evidence, Kaimal argues convincingly that the image, always polysemic in nature, experienced a radical shift in meaning at a crucial point in its history. She demonstrates how the originally destructive connotations of early Nataraja images in the Tamil region were transformed, through the 10th -11th century appropriation of Nataraja as a Chola royal emblem, into the ‘Ananda tandava’ associations made famous in Coomaraswamy’s writings.

Although the scholar frequently refers to Indian and Oriental Art as ‘traditional’, the trope of tradition is used in his writing in a monolithic, transhistorical manner, as the polar opposite of another monolithic concept – the Modern/Western. In this, it differs from a more anthropological understanding of traditions in the plural, grounded in specific historical contexts, material cultures and practices. At the heart of the notion of ‘traditional art’ lies the nationalist construction of the traditional artist/craftsman. In his early writings, particularly in his 1909 book The Indian Craftsman, Coomaraswamy quotes from a wide selection of literary sources from the Jatakas to George Birdwood’s Industrial Arts of India, to theorize the social position, function and training of the ‘hereditary craftsman’ in India and Ceylon. Despite the classification of craftsmen according to their ethos, and the time span covered by the historical documents cited, Coomaraswamy’s ‘Indian Craftsman’ remains an a-historical, reified entity,

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33 This paragraph is excerpted from my paper “The Visual and the Material in Coomaraswamy’s Art History”.
34 This construct finds an echo in Havell’s writing. “The transcendentalism of Vedic thought...is the opposite pole to the barbaric materialism of the present day, which is a negation of all art....” Havell, Ideals of Indian Art, 9.
35 Coomaraswamy, The Indian Craftsman.
sharing many of the features attributed to Indian craftsman in the colonial account. It is only in the following decades that the Indian Craftsman emerges as an Ideal entity in nationalist writing, an earthly counterpart of Visvakarma.

The Indian Craftsman and Traditional Society

The Indian Craftsman in his idealist avatar is a singular, trans-historical entity far removed from the contingencies and realities of the workshop and of earning a livelihood. The artist/craftsman is viewed as secure in his social position, unmindful of personal advancement except in the spiritual realm and embodying the collective Vision of his society in material form in an almost effortless application of unalienated labour. In Coomaraswamy’s ‘unanimous’ societies, “societies whose form is pre-determined by traditional conceptions of order and meaning, there can hardly arise an opposition of interest as between patron and artist.”36 Not surprisingly, Coomaraswamy bases his interpretation of the status of the traditional craftsman on inevitably hegemonic written texts like the Manusmriti, the Mahavamsa, the Ain-i-Akbari and Birdwood’s document, each with a vested interest in preserving status quo.37 The scholar’s refusal to approach these texts critically, to read between the lines, is consistent with his theory of traditional societies as existing in seamless harmony. His celebration of the ‘anonymity’ of the traditional Indian artist, a construct which has come under fire in recent decades, is ideologically connected to his support of the caste system.38 “The anonymity of the artist belongs to a type of culture dominated by the longing to be liberated from oneself.”39

Neither Havell nor Coomaraswamy display the ambivalence towards the caste system that affected many sections of colonial intelligentsia and Indian social reform movements at the turn of the 20th century. Defining caste divisions as “a legal recognition of the natural division of society into functional groups”, Coomaraswamy introduces caste as a system of ‘noblesse oblige’ that has a salubrious influence on social order, the maintenance of quality of artistic

36 Is Art a Superstition?” Coomaraswamy, Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art, 67.
37 Coomaraswamy, The Indian Craftsman.
38 See, for example, Joanna Gottfried Williams, The Two-headed Deer: Illustrations of the Rāmāyaṇa in Orissa (University of California Press, 1996), 139.
production, and the ‘spiritual progress’ of the artist.\textsuperscript{40} Havell’s support for the caste system is similarly unequivocal. “Caste has been the salvation for India art and industry during the critical period of transition through which India is now passing, and the caste traditions are still the most valuable industrial asset India possesses.”\textsuperscript{41}

There can be no doubt that the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century idealist frame depended heavily on both the modern, secular conception of art and the modern conception of nationhood.\textsuperscript{42} Together, these concepts provided the very conditions of possibility for the nationalist discourse.\textsuperscript{43} Given this understanding, it is no small irony that Coomaraswamy and Havell staged their anti-modernist critique within discursive spaces cleared by modern critiques of colonialism and the modernist destabilization of the post-Renaissance definition of art, and all this from the security of their locations within irrefutably modern institutions – the art school and the museum. The moment we perceive the invented nature of the nationalist construct of ‘traditional art’, we realize that the whole edifice of art and nationhood in the nationalist-idealistic discourse draws its sustenance from an ideological foundation that is fundamentally feudal, patriarchal and Brahmanical.\textsuperscript{44} This is the basic contradiction within the new discourse. Even as it takes advantage of modern notions of ‘art’ and ‘nation’, the idealist construct of ‘traditional art’ is inextricably bound up with its ideologically specific construct of ‘traditional society’, the latter invention being offered as a ready-made and complete panacea for the ills the evils of modernity. The whole frame collapses if this ideological foundation is shaken.

This problematic ideological substratum is also the source of the powerfully normative and prescriptive character of the discourse. In defining all of Indian art essentially as ‘spiritual’ and ‘idealistic’, Coomaraswamy and Havell construct a \textit{standard of evaluation} that might arguably be insightful in the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Havell, \textit{The Basis for Artistic and Industrial Revival in India} (University of California Libraries, 1912), 148.
\item Coomaraswamy defines nationality as both a geographical unity and a shared culture.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
context of Gupta sculpture and Rajput painting. However, what of Mughal Painting, which clearly falls short of this ideal even in Coomaraswamy’s writing, or the Kalighat pat, both of which we find fascinating for reasons other than the prescribed ones? The idealist straightjacket is also irrelevant to our interpretation of modern and contemporary art, though its pernicious prescriptions did affect art practice for a few decades in the early 20th century. The traditionalist vein in the idealist discourse offers no spaces for a negotiation between the past and the present, spaces from within which the people of a modern nation can accommodate the artefactual production of the past within the horizons of their contemporary artistic, intellectual and ideological interests and commitments. An abyss separates the modern world from the ‘traditional’ one; the differences which seal the past off from the present are not merely historical but transcendental and insurmountably axiological. In a parodic (in)version of colonialist allochronism, it is the contemporary viewing subject who is rendered unfit to interpret the art works of the more ideal, perfect past. (see previous chapter for an explication of allochronism.) Despite Coomaraswamy’s protests to the contrary, the only way that people in modern societies can embrace the idealist construction of Indian art in its entirety is by consenting to ‘return to a more or less feudal order’, or at the very least, by accepting, with that scholar, the ‘higher’ status of prevalent values in the mediaeval social order.45

**Subject Positions in Idealist Art History**

It is interesting to speculate on the subject positions taken by Havell and Coomaraswamy vis a vis their objects, and the possible positions the reader can occupy within this discourse. Both the writers adopt a more or less oracular tone in their writings, speaking forcefully on behalf of the nation, its past, its peoples, Indian art works and the traditional craftsman. The authoritarian resonance of their writing was necessitated, in their early writings at least, by their polemical and marginal position with respect to the official colonialist discourse. Havell addresses himself both to British officialdom and to an Indian audience. One prime target is the ‘educated,

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45In a postscript to his article “Is Art a Superstition or a Way of Life!” Coomaraswamy denies the charge made by his reviewer, Richard Florsheim, that he advocates “a return to a more or less feudal order”, offering as an alternative strategy a getting back “to first principles”; Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art, 1956, 86–88.
Westernized Indian’, whom Havell sees as needing a re-education tantamount to conversion. In his descriptive writings, Havell vacillates between identifying himself with the artist, the reformist-guru and the (informed) viewer/interpreter of artworks. However, as Osman Jamal points out, Havell’s ultimate political position within the nationalist discourse was as the voice of the Empire.46 His project was to wean Indians away from their unseemly agitation for political sovereignty and modernization, to “dismantle the Macaulayist project and return India to a pre-modern never-never land.”47

Coomaraswamy’s position is more complex and interesting. In an article titled “Reactions to Art in India”, the scholar constructs something like a ‘traditional’ theory of spectatorship, likening the work of visual art to a kama-dhenu, “yielding to the spectator just what he seeks from it or is capable of understanding.” Accordingly, he divides the types of spectator into the pandita, who are ‘concerned about the correctness of iconography’, the bhakta, who are ‘interested in the representation of holy themes as such’, the rasika who are ‘moved by the expression of bhava and rasa,’ expressing ‘appreciation in the technical terminology of rhetoric’, the acarya, the fellow artists ‘who regard chiefly the drawing, and technical skill in general’, and finally the alpa-buddhi-jana, ‘the ordinary laymen’ who ‘like the bright colors, or marvel at the artists dexterity.’48 Though Coomaraswamy claims that we ought to appreciate Indian art from all of these points of view, we find him aligning increasingly with the pandita and less emphatically, with the rasika, in his later writings. When he turned to religion and metaphysics for answers to the anomalous state of affairs in the modern world, Coomaraswamy abdicated his earlier, more politically engaged position as a champion of the marginalized Indian craftsmen and crafts. In his later works, Coomaraswamy’s politically quiescent role expands logically from connoisseur – discriminating expert on art, to Keeper/Curator – custodian of endangered artefacts, to Docent - educationist -presenter of lost contexts, to hermeneut-exegete – recoverer and interpreter of lost meanings, to philosopher-

47Ibid., 18.
metaphysician - apologist for Traditionalism and *Philosophia Perennis*, to visionary-seer – the Voice of 'Traditional' wisdom, which served, in certain contexts, as the conscience of the West.

**SECTION II: STELLA KRAMRISCH AS COUNTERPOINT**

Stella Kramrisch was probably the first professionally trained art historian to undertake an extensive study of pre-modern Indian Art. As a student of the University of Vienna in the second decade of the 20th century, she had a thorough grounding in the techniques of formalist analysis pioneered by scholars like Heinrich Wolfflin and Alois Riegl. Her doctoral study of Indian art was supervised by Josef Strzygowski, a historian of Early Christian, Northern European, Central and West Asian art. Strzygowski used a combination of formalist analysis and comparison to establish continuities between Northern European and Central Asian Art. Race played a central role in Strzygowski’s formulations; in her earlier writings, Kramrisch draws similarly facile connections between formal qualities of art works and ‘ethnical’ factors, bypassing the social and material spheres of art.\(^{49}\)

Her other mentor, Max Dvorak, was well known for his pioneering efforts at reconciling the history of art (*Kunstgeschichte*) with the history of ideas (*Geistesgeschichte*).\(^{50}\) This approach resonated broadly with the idealist art history championed by Coomaraswamy and Havell; Kramrisch’s writings, taken as a whole, stress likewise the connections between Indian metaphysical and religious concepts and Indian art. Among Kramrisch’s mature works, *The Hindu Temple* exemplifies this frame for Indian art.\(^{51}\)

According to Barbara Stoler-Miller, the notions of the manifest and unmanifest, which Kramrisch explores in her seminal works on Siva and Elephanta, show the influence of Dvorak’s conceptual schemes as well. From Alois Riegl, Dvorak’s predecessor at the University of Vienna, Kramrisch derived and modified a version of *Kunstwollen* (will to art), very much in

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\(^{50}\)See Barbara Stoler-Miller’s biographical essay on Kramrisch in Stoler-Miller (ed.), *Exploring India’s Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch* (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1983), 7–8.

evidence in her diachronic formalist studies of Indian art in writings such as Indian Sculpture and “Figural Sculpture of the Gupta Period”.52 Both Riegl and Strzygowski immersed themselves in the ‘minor arts’: this refusal to acknowledge official cultural hierarchies is a legacy Kramrisch embraces in her sensitive writings on folk forms in India.

The sections that follow are by no means a comprehensive study of Kramrisch’s writings on Indian art. My intention here is to tease out those elements of Kramrisch’s framing of the art object that mark her work as a radical departure from the writings of the idealist-metaphysical school. For this reason, I avoid the scholar’s magnum opus, The Hindu Temple and similar works where she deals with the metaphysics and iconography of Indian art. Though these works are significant contributions, I read them as extensions of the interpretive trend set by Coomaraswamy.

Basing my analysis on a small selection of texts, I highlight two specific spheres of influence where Kramrisch establishes a precedent. The first is the scholar’s remarkable and peculiar reintegration of history into the very core of her narrative about art works through time, which bears a striking resemblance to Riegl’s Kunstwollen. The second distinctive feature of Kramrisch’s work is her extraordinarily sensitive immersion in the physical (visual and material) qualities of the art she describes. This distinguishes her writings – especially those involving formal analyses – from the texts of Coomaraswamy and Havell who always privilege content and metaphysics over form. Kramrisch’s Indian Sculpture and “Figural Sculpture of the Gupta period”, for example, establish a completely new approach to the form and physicality of Indian sculpture, which was to influence generations of scholars from Niharranjan Ray to Carmel Berkson and Joanna Williams.53

Kramrisch’s approach to the history and materiality of Indian sculpture

In the 1930’s and 40’s, both Coomaraswamy and Kramrisch were writing within a context where the ‘Indianness’ of Indian art had to be defined,
reiterated and underlined from as many perspectives as possible. As elaborated above, Havell and Coomaraswamy emphasized ‘Ideals’ (as revealed in the Vedas or as part of Perennial Philosophy) as the unifying factor behind all Indian thought and by extension, all Indian art. Kramrisch also broaches the theme of the recognizable “Indianness” of art in her preface to *Indian Sculpture*, linking the ‘plastic idiom’ of Indian art with ‘Indian thought’ through ‘subject-matter’.

The structure and consistency of the plastic idiom are conditioned by the same bent of mind that gave their directions to the systems of Indian thought. A mode of seeing, a peculiar development of the sense of touch, help to render in visual terms a cognate outlook. The experience common to both is the subject-matter of Indian sculpture. It cannot be dissociated from form, for it is integrally one with it.\(^5^4\)

Both Coomaraswamy and Kramrisch theorize certain unchanging ‘essences’ in Indian art. A casual reading of their texts may result in the conclusion that they are talking of the same sort of trans-historical essences – in the realm of common transcendental Ideas or Ideals. However, close attention to the theoretical underpinnings of Kramrisch’s *Indian Sculpture* reveals that what the Austrian scholar means when she repeatedly emphasizes the ‘permanent’, ‘indelible’, ‘essential’ qualities of Indian art is, in many ways, the polar opposite of what, for Coomaraswamy and Havell, comprise the essential and unifying features of Indian art.

For Coomaraswamy, the true significance of Indian Art lies not in the exuberant diversity of material manifestations across region and time but in the Unity, the persistence of perennial metaphysical Ideas or Ideals that lie behind (and echoing the literal meaning of ‘meta-physical’) ‘beyond/above’ material, phenomenal forms. To repeat a Coomaraswamy formulation mentioned earlier:

...the most significant element in any given work of art is precisely that aspect of it which may, and often does, persist unchanged throughout millennia and in widely separated areas; and the least

\(^{54}\)Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture*, x.
significant, those accidental variations of style by which we are enabled to date a given work or even in some cases to attribute it to an individual artist.  

Again, in his essay ‘Is Art a Superstition…’ Coomaraswamy reiterates the contrast between the reliable constancy of Idea and ‘accidents’ of style.

Where an idea to be expressed remains the same throughout long sequences of stylistic variation, it is evident that this idea remains the motif or motivating power behind the work...It will readily be seen, then, that in concentrating our attention on stylistic peculiarities of works of art, we are confining it to a consideration of accidents, and really only amusing ourselves with a psychological analysis of personalities; not by any means penetrating to what is constant and essential to art itself.

Kramrisch on the other hand, deliberately tunes her remarkably sensitive formalist antennae to sense precisely those ‘stylistic peculiarities’ which Coomaraswamy is so dismissive about. In formal-stylistic analyses like “Figural Sculpture of the Gupta Period” and “Pala and Sena Sculpture”, the scholar revels in a series of freeze-frame vignettes, creatively linking almost imperceptible changes in the physiognomy, pose, drapery and composition of individual examples of sculpture with changes in visualization, ideas and concepts and the influence of what she calls ‘ethnical factors’. The following example, a typical descriptive paragraph (in this case about fifth century Sarnath sculpture) excerpted from “Figural Sculpture of the Gupta Period”, will serve to illustrate this point.

In the mid-fifth century each sculptural profile consisted of generous, flowing curves. The profile of the trunk, from the breastbone to the abdomen, showed a gradual rising, like an elastically stretched curve. In the seventies this profile was retained; yet, as a result of the narrower and more elongated shape of the figure, it now lacked the space that would allow a gradual

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57 “Figural Sculpture of the Gupta Period” and “Pala and Sena Sculpture” in Exploring India’s Sacred Art.
lateral transition to the flanks. In the seventies this profile was more pronounced, and its curve recalls the female figures of Gothic art.\textsuperscript{58}

What role do these stylistic changes, chronicled at an unprecedented level of detail, have to play in Kramrisch’s formalist analyses? The kinds of changes she describes above seem to convulse Gupta figural sculpture every few decades, but rarely in a ‘predictable’ fashion or along a definable trajectory; they are truly ‘accidents’ in Coomaraswamy’s sense of the term. How does she reconcile these apparently chance, micro-level changes, which appear to be, at the most, ‘trends’ in artistic taste and practice, with the larger unities which are central to the nationalist-metaphysical school – the ‘Indianness’ of Indian art and its teleological unfolding?

The narrative in \textit{Indian Sculpture}, for example, has a clearly defined plot. Kramrisch hypothesizes an aboriginal Paleolithic origin for Indian plastic art. Indus Valley sculpture, with its ‘deliberately subtle or snugly powerful form’ is actually the creative climax of the ‘paleolithic heritage’.\textsuperscript{59} Mauryan art, though of the ‘same stock’ as Indus valley sculpture, is a weakened version of the latter, displaying passing Persian and Greek influence.\textsuperscript{60} The narrative proceeds to characterize the \textit{foundations} of ‘classicism’ by means of common features found at the ‘early classical’ sculpture of Madhyadesa, Orissa, South India and Dekkhan.\textsuperscript{61} The \textit{early maturity} of sculptural art in Mathura, the Western Indian caves, Central India and Orissa, Gandhara and Vengi is characterized by varying responses to ‘the experience of life’, culminates in the ‘long-prepared miracle of transubstantiation’.\textsuperscript{62} Kramrisch views mediaeval sculpture as both a continuation and a breaking away from, the formal values of ‘classical’ Gupta and its regional variants. Then, as if to hastily unify these clearly defined formal changes, and acknowledge the nationalist agenda of underscoring of the essential ‘Indianness’ of all these historical variations, she writes: “Ancient, classical and mediaeval, when

\textsuperscript{58}Figural Sculpture of the Gupta Period” in ibid., 193–194.
\textsuperscript{59}Kramrisch, \textit{Indian Sculpture}, 3.
\textsuperscript{60}Ibid., 11–12.
\textsuperscript{61}Ibid., 13–37.
\textsuperscript{62}Ibid., 38–55.
taken in the direction of the arrow of time, denote the reactions of India, the
motherland, with its creative soil, to the people it nourishes.\textsuperscript{63}

However, as Stoler-Miller points out in her biographical essay, for Kramrisch,
‘the meaningful art object is not merely a metaphysical symbol; it is also vital
in its manifest form.’\textsuperscript{64} Unlike for Coomaraswamy and Havell, the 'Indianness'
of Indian art, for Kramrisch, is not a rarified unity vaguely defined as a
shared idealism. In \textit{Indian Sculpture}, the Austrian scholar undertakes the
formidable project of defining this Indianness in formalist terms:

How this Indianness is expressed in terms of relation between line,
surface, volume and other elements of visualization, will be dealt
with here. That there are permanent qualities throughout the fabric
of Indian sculpture, and what these qualities are will have to be
shown. These essential qualities, all inter-related and inseparable,
contain within their compass the life of Indian plastic art.\textsuperscript{65}

An interesting tension emerges when we compare a work like \textit{The Hindu
Temple}, with its static, idealized conceptual scheme, with a text like \textit{Indian
Sculpture} which virtually journals the minutae of stylistic change in Indian
sculpture as though they were \textit{symptoms} experienced by a single body
persisting through time. Whenever Kramrisch synthesizes these two
approaches within a single text, her acute awareness of the physical
peculiarities of individual art works tends to overwhelm her ‘reading’ of the
art work in iconographic and metaphysical terms.\textsuperscript{66} Caught up in the tide of
visual and material impressions of the particular, she jeopardizes the
logocentrism of idealist-transcendental scheme in which meaning always has
causal/epistemic precedence over form and individual physical manifestations
merely serve as illustrations of the unchanging metaphysical Ideal. The
individual work springs into sharp focus as Kramrisch plunges the reader into
a vortex of intimate, proximate and distant views, a vortex powered by her
keen observation and eccentric prose.

\textsuperscript{63}Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{64}Stoler-Miller in \textit{Exploring India’s Sacred Art}, 27.
\textsuperscript{65}Kramrisch, \textit{Indian Sculpture}, ix.
\textsuperscript{66}For example, Kramrisch ‘The Image of Mahadeva in the Cave-Temple of Elephanta Island’
in \textit{Exploring India’s Sacred Art}, 141–148.