

Ananda Coomaraswamy's Misconception of Individuality

A Response

By Matthew Ballou

In the book *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, Ananda Coomaraswamy expounds on the virtues of an archetypal stance in art. Seeing individualism as being at odds with the expression of true divine forms in art, he advocates a severe disjunction between observational representation and good art. While I recognize that mere observation is neither the end of art, nor is it sufficient for a masterful work, I disagree with Coomaraswamy's rejection of it wholly as an affectation of the modern, secular age. The specific representation of individuals in art is rather an exponent firstly of the modern democratization of ideas and secondly of personally applicable spirituality.

While citing many examples from ancient art and various religious philosophies that rejected the expression of a specific personage in deference to an idealized form, Coomaraswamy solidified his position in the appropriateness of the idealized archetype over the particular individual. However, Coomaraswamy seems to be confusing the artistic developments of realism with the philosophical developments of the modern age. It is incorrect to assume that the two are necessarily entangled. On the most basic level, we are able to relate to each other when we *see* each other. Indeed, we desire to see each other in a psychological picturing of ourselves: representation fills that need on several levels, not only in a superficial way. We understand that there is a depth to the experience of life, that there is more than just the human body to be seen. We do know that the parts – which comprise who and what we really are – are not those accidents of features and traits that we can see outwardly. We appreciate that our bodies are vessels in the truest sense, being the habitation of our souls. However, we also realize this “more than the sum of our parts” understanding is only a part of our condition. We also understand that there is a practicality to our physical state and that our existing in that state forms and affects the invisible part of us. This truth is the major problem with the opinions of those who would entirely separate the inner and outer experience. They do not realize that the secular and the sacred intersect in the human form. The human being was designed to be able to interface with the divine because of the construction of our inner *and* outer parts, which were created “in the image of God” – image here meaning a “moral or spiritual likeness” (Nee, 18). It is obvious then, that representation – specifically the human visage – is essential to a realm of spiritual content in art.

That we should wish to personalize representation is not inappropriate when done in a considered, understanding way. It is a matter of identification. To identify with people, to know that they are individuals who have had to make their way through this world – interacting personally and socially with all that is around them – makes us empathize with their existence. Christ did as much when he condescended to our low state in order to identify with us and partake of our sorrows personally. He did indeed live His life with the perfection of God, but he also interacted physically with the intimacy of a man, thus enabling the true activation of a divine intersection with humanity. We partake in that godly action of identification when we contemplate the beautifully rendered physical state of an individual in a painting or other work of art. When done well, the presentation

of an individual can be reflexive, causing an inward and an outward understanding in us all.

The depth of empathy and understanding delivered by good representational art was in some degree lacking in past (Renaissance and prior) artworks, because they were generally didactic, interested in telling and commanding rather than presenting and enriching. We can understand the concept of anonymity within certain ages and their corresponding anonymously deified, idealized images in the light of the fact that, for the most part, their cosmology, theology and philosophy were not personally directed. That is, they did not anticipate or realize a personal relationship with their God. This relational aspect is important. The medieval artists did not make art as an interaction; that was not a part of its use. That work existed to teach and direct - there was no notion of the possibility of interaction with the subjects of the works. Even in terms of the spiritual function, those works were not meant to inspire a physical manifestation, rather, a spiritual one. It would be safe to say that these works were inept at inspiring proactive attitudes in the viewer. These images did not make people *want* to live a certain way, they simply instructed people in the fact that they should. Thus the works did not fully succeed in their proposed and potential function of inspiring true spiritual life in the faithful.

However, for us, relational content is essential to powerful, moving work. Works that make us want to think, want to feel, want to relate; these are the activities of identification with others. This inner activity only happens if we are compelled to empathy through seeing others as like unto ourselves. Our sight of the eternal takes place in that internal action. Yet Coomaraswamy assumed that the proper use of art was for it to inspire through ideal forms and the nonspecific representation of the divine. But how can one truly relate to such a deity, except in fear and awe? In Christian philosophy, Christ became incarnate - one of us - for the express reason of coming into our state, making a way for us to relate to him because of the values he exchanged with us. God sees Christ when he looks on us, we see Christ when we look to God. That personal application makes spirituality real to the individual. Similar actions take place in us when we meekly approach a well-made image of another human being and understand that there is a person behind the visage. We understand that the picture is not purporting to display the physical appearance of the person only, which is a development in viewing that Coomaraswamy seems to forget. In celebrated Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum's opinion, that picturing of the hidden reality of the individual is what is lacking in contemporary art: "People of today have never really seen themselves recreated, and therefore lack a visual sense of self... The image of their innermost selves apparently no longer exists..." (Quoted in Pettersson, 24) It is that image of the innermost self that inspires contemplation of the timeless and eternal essence, that points to what is beyond us by picturing what is in us. Coomaraswamy believed that by displaying what we could not be, we could be taught about the divine. Yet we have learned that the avenue to spirituality in art comes not so much from the idealized, abstracted divine form as it does from the expression of the deepest parts of our existence through the visage of the identifiable.

A faulty categorization relating the representation of individuals to the arena of individualistic attitudes is what seems to have occurred in Coomaraswamy's thinking. The concept of individualism being a socially backward expression of western thought is not new and is a sentiment echoed by many (including some of the best artists of the 20th

century). Of course, the real issue for representational art in all of this – and it is much more than mere semantics – is not truly connected to individuality, but rather to *personality*. Individuality is inseparable from humanity because we are distinct and autonomous beings, existing within our own bodies and physically disconnected from others. The personality on the other hand is a mitigated, created function of consciousness. Personality is the initial creation of the extant self when coupled with the overriding social construct. The distinction between individuality and personality is important, because the statements made against personality have logical place in the art discussion. Individuality, however, is not an appropriate arena of condemnation. Individuality is a condition, a state, and not an enforceable presence as is personality. As a directive force, personality is “one of the plagues of modernism,” according to Balthus. He agrees with Coomaraswamy that anonymity in painting is key to an out-flowing of spirituality in the work: “the more anonymous a painting is, the more real it is.” (Balthus, 6) Balthus, an idiosyncratic man who possessed amazing charm and charisma, understood the difference between individuality and personality, and that is why he purposefully removed himself from the celebrity that he could have been (an attitude which in itself created his legend), given his magnetic personality. He believed in the primacy of his work and the superiority of an individual expression of universal themes over from the affectation of his own personality. So Balthus understands what Coomaraswamy does not: that individuality and anonymity are not at odds.

The main problem with personality is the force with which it has encroached on the place, function, and meaning of art. Individuals have always made art and have always been the locus of the artistic action. Individuals have, in the past, understood that their personalities are unnecessary to the expression of universal notions and have acted accordingly, creating timeless works. When the personality is supreme, the works become overly idiosyncratic, dated, and politicized. That is, they become non-transcendent, empty vessels lacking the meaning they purport to contain. Nerdrum observes that “our time is the age of fragmentation... the spirit of unification is gone.” (Quoted in Pettersson, 23) Both Nerdrum and Balthus remind us of the spiritual mission of art, and mourn modernity’s lack of spiritual function (or “use” as Coomaraswamy called it). Nerdrum continues, “Today the world resides in a spiritual darkness... the entire world gropes for spiritual renewal.” (Ibid, 24) The implication here is that a focus on personality has helped to affect a radical shift in the culture away from spirituality and universality towards emptiness and non-direction.

All three men mentioned above maintain that the development of rational sciences and western intellectualism are the causal culprit in the crime of modernity’s spiritual malaise. I would argue instead that the magnification of personality has much more to do with the French Revolution and Enlightenment period than with the Renaissance or Reformation, but that is for another essay. The issue remains: the universality and spiritual concerns of art have been replaced with a cult of personality. Coomaraswamy misses the point when he condemns the ideal of rugged individualism, seeing it as the antithesis of his key virtues of anonymity and unanimity. He fails to acknowledge what he states himself, that “human individuality is not an end, only a means” (Coomaraswamy, 41). That is, he fails to take his notion a step further and realize that an art based on individuality as an end within itself *is* personality-driven art, whereas individuality as a *conveyance* and mediator is individuality’s true, natural, and beneficial

state. Individuality as a condition of being human is neither here nor there as a determining factor, it simply is. Certainly an awareness of individuality can lead to the expression of the personality, but that is a reaction to external factors, such as social and physical conditions, rather than some inherent flaw in individuality itself.

So we see that it is not the concept of individuality that is antithetical to proper expression in art. In fact, it is much more the mistaken humanism of the personality than the potentiality of the enlightened individual that causes the problem for contemporary art. If Coomaraswamy finds his central virtues of anonymity and unanimity at odds with individuality rather than personality, it is because he forgets the differences between being and acting, condition and affectation.

It is interesting that the very examples Coomaraswamy uses to show inappropriate functions in art may indeed be the current bastion of the values he promotes. Rejecting portrait work and observation-based art because of their supposedly earthly, sensual basis, Coomaraswamy cuts off a truly democratic means of significant, relevant spirituality in art. Portraiture and figurative representation (when done well and with proper consideration) allow us to slip through the observational representation to the spiritual. This activity does not mean that we reject representation as such, rather that we use it well and move past it, through it. The essence of a person is reflected in their visage and can be contemplated via the corporeal experience of seeing. This fact is obvious since all of us must interact with the physical world and, in doing so, see through it to the essential form of the universe, apprehending the eternal as it shines through the fabric of physical reality. The understanding imagination sees through the temporal to the eternal through contemplation.

Coomaraswamy is right in his advocacy of traditional archetypal knowledge (*Philosophia Perennis*), but he fails to recognize the filling power of the archetype. The archetype is seen *in* the specified, but is not *of* the specified. The specific exists on top of, shrouding, the archetype, not the other way around. The specific cannot overpower the archetype in essence or truth and only weakly and temporarily so in socialized convention. Thus we see that there is really no effective attack against eternal forms when specific temporal (personal) forms are used in art. In fact, there may be a detrimental effect when personal forms are *not* used, to the degree that the viewer is cut off from the message because of its idealized form.

Coomaraswamy mistakes the implications of his notions regarding the use and necessity of ideal or divine forms in art. The idealized form lends itself very easily to social reconfiguration and recontextualization, because it does not relate to people in their state; rather, it confronts them with what they are not. The idealized form that indicates the divine does not express itself in potentiality, rather in the unattainable. The contemplation of potentialities - "what could be and should be" - is an appropriate arena of cognition. However, potentialities are positive extrapolations, not - like ideals - abstractions of archetypes and socialized norms; potentialities are those things that are objectively possible. The ideal itself is a tool; a thing apprehended conceptually, not an observed state. The ideal is not necessarily achievable, while the potentiality is ostensibly both achievable and desirable. Coomaraswamy seems content to allow the purview of art to extend only to a sort of dogma; such is the realm of the ideal. By advancing this position, he condones an ineffectuality for art, the opposite of the "usefulness" he very much desires art to have.

Coomaraswamy seems to have a problem coming to terms with the facts of modern life. That is, he constantly harks back to some semi-archetypal notion of the artist as every man, every man as artist. Unfortunately, this state is no longer – and arguably never was – the case. Instead of lamenting that fact and working to rectify it or simply dealing with it, he seems to vilify the function of the artist of today as single, individual – and therefore corrupt – seeker. It is this proposal of modern art's decadence that is the central attitude behind his ideas; it is his "emotional expression of discontent with modern civilization" (Kuspit, 44). That discontent flows into a sort of advocacy of socialism for Coomaraswamy, which seems to him to be the only way to gain the unanimity of assent necessary for the expression of art he believes is proper. Of course, would it amount to assent or coercion? The socialist power structures we have seen throughout history have uniformly enforced ideology rather than allowing for the free flow of ideas. I highly doubt that the type of art Coomaraswamy suggests would be possible in this sort of unanimous society. His socialist sympathies (which were more likely than not merely a compromise with modernity) aside, I believe Coomaraswamy is truly drawn to the sort of tribal unity that early survivalist societies ubiquitously applied to every area of their lives.

Obviously now, a distinction has to be made, between the political unanimity of one era and spiritual unanimity of another, since the implications of each are different. The spiritual unanimity of certain past cultures often existed in spite of the overriding sociopolitical structure and thus permeated the thought of many nations and continents with similar archetypal expressions. If this is the sort of unanimity that Coomaraswamy means, then he is correct in his yearning for it, though it is an unattainable dream in our current world since we are no longer bound by an economy of base necessity. If he advocates a socialistic sociopolitical structure rather than a theocratic system, I can state without reservation that in such a system no good arts would come about, except in those people who retained a notion of individualistic freedom. This fact has been borne out in the years since Coomaraswamy's death in 1947. The primacy of individual freedom is a moral necessity, even if it makes way for the personality to manifest itself over universal concerns. Obviously in this situation artists are, as the last century has shown us, often going to follow an easier path – the one to the self. But those artists who look for eternity are going to go beyond themselves, seeing the eternal in, through, and past the temporal. This is the greatest task of the artist; few care to undertake it.

In the end, Coomaraswamy's notions have significance to the art world today. Many artists and theorists are coming around to understanding the drawbacks and failures of postmodernism and have begun to work on solutions to the problems it has left us. By advocating an archetypal universality, Coomaraswamy secures a legacy that supports the best that art has to offer us; he can be forgiven for confusing individuality with personality in this case. However, clearing up that confusion is important for those of us interested in the negotiation of art in the future. We all, as individuals, can be a part of a universal expression that rejects personality rapport in the interest of timelessness, bringing about transcendent understanding instead of ironic unintelligibility.

An Afterward

That people continue to misrepresent the division of the soul and the spirit, the body and the mind, the divine and the human, is disheartening. Don't they know that these are

merely two sides of the same coin, locked in a conjunction that we must recognize before we can truly understand them? As it pertains to art, let us not forget the transparent power of all that we see. This world, and our physical form, was meant to be a conveyance - not a wall - a “glass, darkly” through which we glimpse the eternal. This is the true function of the archetype: utilization of the basically human to move us towards the converse aspect of our common experience: the fundamentally eternal.

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