

A Craft as a Fountain of Grace and a Means of Realization

By Aristide Messinesi

Ganga Flows
In bubbling foam
And leaping spray
Behold
The Shakti on Her way!

Ganga flows
We ride Her waves
And come to this:
The Sea of Beauty,
The Ocean of Her Bliss.

In re-expounding the Theory of Art with so much depth of understanding and such clarity of definition, Dr. A. K. Coomaraswamy has rendered a greater service than any other contemporary writer to practising artists of every description. The testimony of one, therefore, who has himself benefited by that exposition will perhaps not come amiss in this collection and it will serve to show whether and to what extent an individual can make use of a manual trade as an effective means of Realization in this age of increasing disorder, when both the hands and the mind through which he would normally receive and transmit the Light appear to have become insensitive and unresponsive to every spiritual influence.

Let it be said from the outset that if the Light's reflection in the individual, that is to say his inward light, be brilliant enough it will shine through any curtain; and likewise let it be said that there is nothing to prevent this from happening even to-day. Similarly, if the echo of Vocation, that is to say the inward voice, be sufficiently loud and insistent it will pierce through any wall. The inward Light and the inward voice represent the essential part of the individual demanding

its rights. In a traditional¹ society it does not have to insist clamorously because a society of this kind is organized in such a way as to favour these rights. Modern society, however, being antitraditional, recognizes no such rights; it has in fact tried, and by dint of trying, it has largely succeeded in squeezing the essence out of the individual and leaving a devitalized substance which it can mould as it pleases. Present leaders of society, those countless chemists, engineers, industrialists, publicists and psychologists are, no doubt, likewise listening to a voice of sorts, but of the exact nature of the call the less said the better.

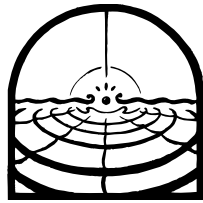
The first decade of the XXth century was in many respects a critical one, for it immediately preceded the visible collapse of so much that had already been undermined during the Victorian era. The attitude of society towards artisanship had become one of indifference and contempt; but so far it was not consciously hostile. Open warfare had not yet been declared against the manual trades and people were not being driven by such an inexorable pressure of circumstance into the mechanized industries. Compromises were still possible; a training in handicrafts, though superficial and rudimentary, was still obtainable if one went out of one's way to search for it. An existence could just be eked out by work of hands.

In England the influence of William Morris and his followers, which had never penetrated very deep, was by this time hardly to be reckoned with. In those sections of society which might be described as "cultured," and which incidentally were already predominantly urbanized in character, painting held the place of honour among the visual arts. It was an art which these people had made their own and which they were able to practise in a comparatively free manner. Handicrafts, on the other hand, which were less highly esteemed, became the 'appanage' of servile craftsmen whose work could not be expected to escape the effects of the limited taste and viewpoint of the people from whom they, as craftsmen, received their commissions—though it must not be forgotten in this connection that the work of the rural artisan, wherever

¹ Editor's Note: This essay was first published in *Art and Thought* (Festschrift in honor of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy), Luzac, London 1947, and in *Tomorrow* (Studies in Comparative Religion), London, Winter 1965, Vol. 13, No. 1

By a "Tradition" is meant not merely a historical continuity and still less a blind observance of customs bereft of their former meaning, but a transmission of principles of more-than-human origin, effectively applied to every field of thought and action.

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