

The Wisdom of Ananda Coomaraswamy

Reflections on Indian Art, Life, and Religion



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World Wisdom



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Ananda K. Coomaraswamy in 1937

ART

“Art is expression” (Croce): “Art (*kavya*) is a statement informed by *rasa*” (*Sahityadarpana*): art is man’s handiwork. Art is fine or beautiful to the degree in which it is done finely and achieves its proper intentions; it is not art or ugly to the degree in which it is done carelessly and fails to achieve its proper intentions. These intentions are always the satisfaction of human necessities, which necessities are never purely practical (physical) nor purely theoretical (spiritual); man needs bread, but does not live by bread alone. When these necessities are purely individual, art is isolated from its environment and requires explanation even to contemporaries, and it is difficult to see why such art should be exhibited. When these necessities are general (e.g. early Italian painting or Indian sculpture), art is comprehensible to all normal contemporaries, and is used rather than exhibited. The latter kind of art may even become “universal,” i.e. comprehensible and serviceable beyond its original environment. (44)

Art is a language, and will be a dead language if no change in it be permitted; if it is not to be a medium of expression of new ideas and new thoughts, it will lose relatively to the national life. But like the spoken language it can only change nobly, in response to an impulse from within, the irresistible demand for words, in which to communicate the new (emotions) conceptions. The aims of the Indian art are not for one time only; the synthesis of Indian thought is one whole (compound) composed equally of present, past, and future. We stand in relation to both; the past has made us what we are, the future we ourselves are molding; our duty to the future is to enrich, not to destroy the past. The aim and the method are eternal. The formula and the vision must change and widen. The future is to be greater than the past; not contemptuous of it; but its inevitable product, an integral part of it. (23)

It is not to enlarge our collection of bric-a-brac that we ought to study ancient or foreign arts, but to enlarge our own consciousness of being. (8)

The true critic, *rasika*, perceives the beauty of which the artist has exhibited the signs. (3)

The poet is born, not made; but so also is the *rasika* whose genius differs in degree, not in kind, from that of the original artist. (3)

It is of the essence of art to bring back into order the multiplicity of Nature, and it is in this sense that it “prepares all creatures to return to God.” Decadent art is simply an art that is no longer felt or energized. (*)

Modern European art endeavors to represent things as they are in themselves, Asiatic and Christian art to represent things as they are in God, or nearer to their source. (24)

If bees have been deceived by painted flowers, why was honey not provided?... The more an image is true to nature, the more it lies. (30)

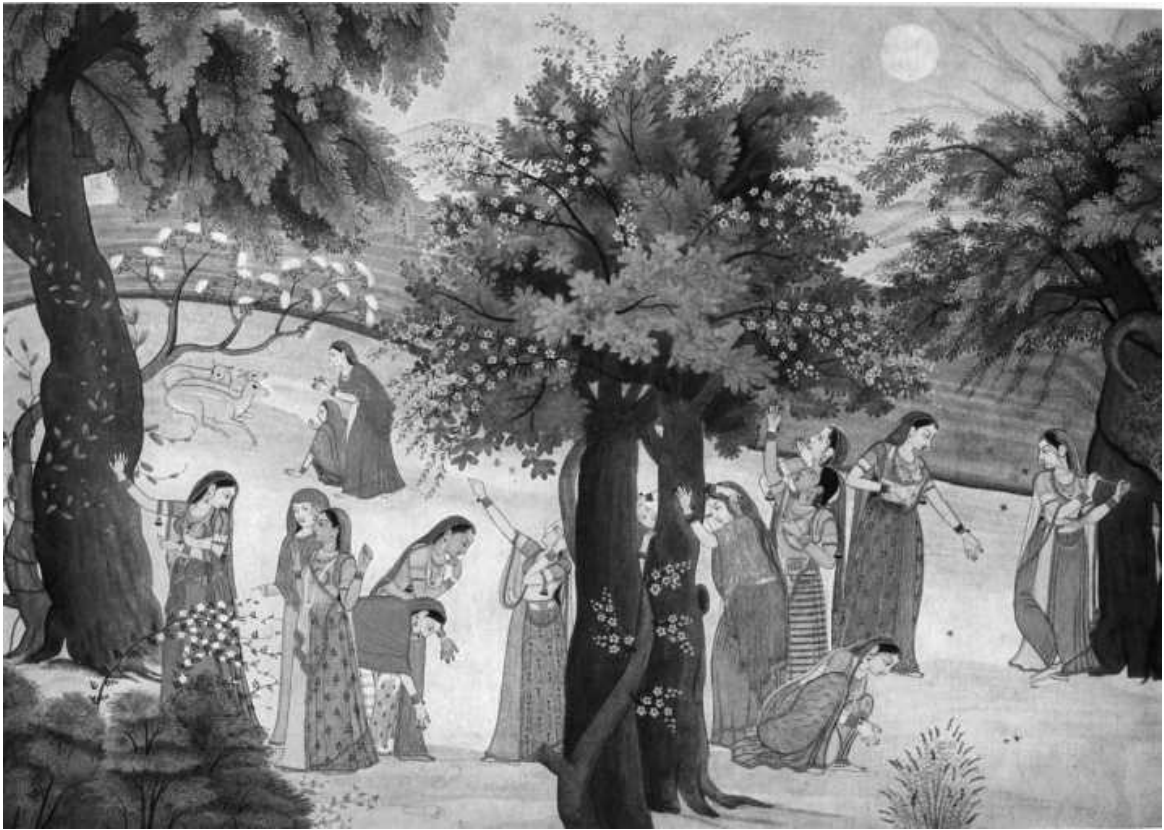
Mere narration (*nirvaha*, *itihasa*), bare utility, are not art, or are only art in a rudimentary sense. Only the man of little wit can fail to recognize that art, by nature, is a well-spring of delight, whatever may have been the occasion of its appearance. On the other hand, there cannot be imagined an art without meaning or use. The doctrine of art for art’s sake is disposed of in a sentence quoted in the *Sahitya Darpana*, V.L. Commentary: “All expression (*vakya*), human or revealed, are directed to an end beyond themselves (*haryaparam*) or if not so determined (*ata-partve*) are thereby comparable only to the utterances of a madman.” (30)

Anonymity is thus in accordance with the truth; and it is one of the proudest distinctions of the Hindu culture. The names of the “authors” of the epics are but shadows, and in later ages it was a constant practice of writers to suppress their own names and ascribe their work to a mythical or famous poet, thereby to gain a better attention for the truth that they would rather claim to have “heard” than to have “made.” Similarly, scarcely a single Hindu painter or sculptor is known by name; and the entire range of Sanskrit literature cannot exhibit a single autobiography and but little history. (3)

What we mean by “original” is “coming from its source within” like water from a spring.... There can be no property in ideas. The individual does not make them, but *finds them*; let him only see to it that he really takes possession of them, and work will be original in the same sense that the recurrent seasons, sunrise and sunset are ever new although in name the same. (45)

The absence of names in the history of Indian art is a great advantage to the historian of art, for he is forced to concentrate all his attention upon their work, and its reaction to life and thought as a whole, while all temptation to anecdotal criticism is removed. (6)

The Indian artist, although a person, is not a personality; his personal



Krishna and the Gopis, Kangra, 19th century

idiosyncrasy is at the most a part of his equipment, and never the occasion of his art. All of the greatest Indian works are anonymous, and all that we know of the lives of Indian artists in any field could be printed in a tract of a dozen pages. (8)

Nations are created by artists and poets, not by merchants and politicians. In art lies the deepest life principles. (5)

To the “primitive” man who, like the angels, had fewer ideas and used less means than we, it had been inconceivable that anything, whether natural or artificial, could have a use or value only and not also a meaning; this man literally could not have understood our distinction of sacred from profane or of spiritual from material values; he did not live by bread alone. It had not occurred to him that there could be such a thing as an industry without art, or the practice of any art that was not at the same time a ritual going on with what had been done by God in the beginning. (24)

The representation of a man must really correspond to the idea of the man, but must not look so like him as to deceive the eye; for the work of art is a mind-made thing and aims at the mind, but an illusion is no more *intelligible* than the natural object it mimics. (That, I think, settles the whole question of naturalism.) (24)

We ought then, to appreciate Indian art from every point of view, to be equipped with learning, piety, sensibility, knowledge of technique, and simplicity, combining the qualities of the *pandita*, the *bhakta*, the *acarya*, and the *alpa-buddhi jana*. (37)

The Indian must see with his own eye. Two things are needful; one that he should be saturated with the traditional art of his race in order that he may know how to see; the other, that he be saturated with the traditional culture of the East that he may know what to see. (*)

Try to believe in the regeneration of India through art, and not by politics and economics alone. A purely material ideal will never give to us the lacking strength to build up a great enduring nation. For that we need ideals and dreams impossible and visionary, the food of martyrs and of artists. (76)

The Hindus have never believed in art for art's sake; their art, like that of medieval Europe, was an art for love's sake. (6)

In the first place all Hindu art (Brahmanical and *Mahayana* Buddhist) is religious. (6)

We ought not, then, to like a work of art merely because it is like something we like. It is unworthy to exploit a picture or a phrase merely as a



A potter in Ceylon

substitute for a beautiful environment or a beloved friend. We ought not to demand to be pleased and flattered, for our true need is to be touched by love or fear. The meaning of art is far deeper than that of its immediate subject. (6)

What is art, or rather what was art? 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 the things that is to be made, and how to embody this form in suitable material, so that the resulting artifact may be used. The ship-builder builds, not for aesthetic reasons, but in order that men may be able to sail on the water; it is a matter of fact that the well-built ship will be beautiful, but it is not for the sake of making something beautiful that the ship-builder goes to work; it is a matter of fact that a well made icon will be beautiful, in other words, that it will please when seen by those for whose use it was made, but the imager is casting his bronze primarily for use and not as a mantelpiece ornament or for the museum showcase. (22)

I do not perceive a fundamental distinction of arts as national—Indian, Greek, or English. All art interprets life; it is like the *Vedas*, eternal, independent of the accidental conditions of those who see or hear. (6)

Art is not an aesthetic but a rhetorical activity. (*)

Indian art and culture was a joint creation of the Dravidian and Aryan genius, a welding together of symbolic and representative, abstract and explicit, language and thought. (2)

We are peculiar people. I say this with reference to the fact that whereas almost all other peoples have called their theory of art or expression a “Rhetoric” and have thought of art as a kind of knowledge, we have invented an “Aesthetic” and think of art as a kind of feeling.

The Greek original of the word “aesthetic” means “perception by the senses, especially by feeling.” (24).

Art contains in itself the deepest principles of life, the truest guide to the greatest art, the Art of Living. The true life, the ideal of Indian culture, is itself a unity and an art, because of its inspiration by one ruling passion, the desire to realize a spiritual inheritance. All things in India have been valued in the light of this desire. (*)

The artist is not a special kind of man, but every man who is not an artist in some field, every man without a vocation, is an idler. The kind of artist that a man should be, carpenter, painter, lawyer, farmer, or priest, is determined by his own nature, in other words by his nativity. The only man who

has a right to abstain from all constructive activities is the monk, who has also surrendered all those uses that depend on things that can be made and is no longer a member of society. No man has a right to any social status, who is not an artist. (16)

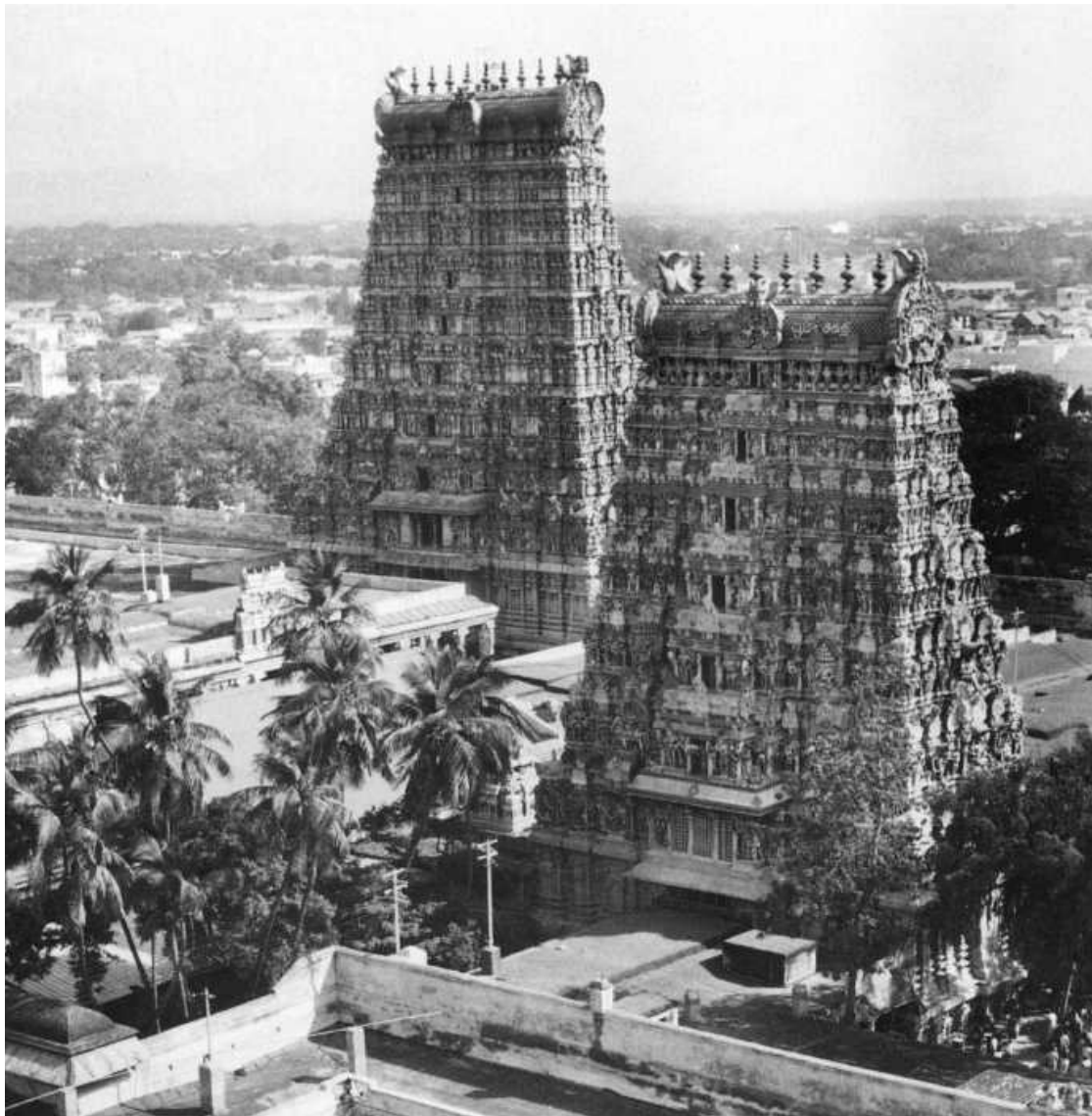
The anonymity of the artist belongs to a type of culture dominated by the longing to be liberated from oneself. All the force of this philosophy is directed against the delusion "I am the doer." "I" am not in fact the doer, but the instrument; human individuality is not an end but only a means. The supreme achievement of individual consciousness is to lose or find (both words mean the same) itself in what is both its first beginning and its last end. All that is required of the instrument is efficiency and obedience; it is not for the subject to aspire to the throne; the constitution of man is not a democracy, but the hierarchy of body, soul, and spirit. Is it for the Christian to consider any work "his own," when even Christ has said that "I do nothing of myself"? Or for the Hindu, when Krishna has said, "The comprehensor cannot form the concept 'I am the doer'"? Or for the Buddhist, for whom it has been said that "To wish that it may be made known that 'I was the author' is the thought of a man not yet adult"? (16)

It cannot be too clearly understood that the mere representation of nature is never the aim of Indian art. Probably no truly Indian sculpture has been wrought from a living model or any religious painting copied from life. Possibly no Hindu artist of the old schools ever drew from nature at all. His store of memory pictures, his power of visualization and his imagination were for his purpose finer means, for he desired to suggest the Idea behind sensuous appearance not to give the detail of seeming reality that was in truth but *Maya*, illusion.... To mistake *Maya* for reality were error indeed. "Men of no understanding think of Me, the unmanifest, as having manifestation, knowing not My higher being to be Changeless, Supreme" (*Bhagavad Gita* VII, 24). (27)

The particular form suitable to each image is to be found described in the *Shilpa Shastras*, the canonical texts followed by the image-makers.... These texts supply the data needed for the mental representation which serves as the sculptor's model. According to his vision, says Shukracharya, he will fashion in temples the image of the divinities he adores. It is thus, and not by some other means, in truth and not by direct observation, that he will be able to attain his goal. —The essential part of art, the "visualization" (and one could say the same of the ecstatic audition of the musician) is thus a kind of *yoga*; the artist is sometimes looked on as a sort of *yogi*.

Often, before undertaking his work, he celebrates certain special rites aimed at stifling the working of the conscious will and setting free the subjective faculties. In this case truth does not come from visual observation but from “muscular awareness” of the movements the artist has understood and realized in his own members. —The *Shastras* also give the canons of proportion. These proportions vary according to the divinity to be represented. Architecture also has its own canons which regulate even the very smallest details. (86)

Great art or science is the flower of a free national life pouring its abundant energy into ever new channels, giving some new intimation of a truth and harmony before unknown or forgotten. (5)



Partial view of the Meenakshi Temple at Madurai, Tamil Nadu

There is a close affinity between art and religion which is seldom understood, and we very often overlook the fact that aesthetic and religious spheres exhibit a natural kinship. (30)

Nothing is common or unclean. All life is a sacrament, no part of it more so than another, and there is no part of it that may not symbolize eternal and infinite things. In this great same-sightedness the opportunity for art is great. But in this religious art it must not be forgotten that life is not to be represented for its own sake but for the sake of the Divine expressed in and through it. (5)

It is hardly necessary to point out that the Vedic sacrifice, which is always described as the imitation of “what was at the beginning,” is, in all its forms and in the full meaning of the terms, a work of art and at the same time a synthesis of the arts of liturgy and architecture, and one can say the same of the Christian Mass (which is also a sacrifice in mime) where the dramatic and architectural elements are inseparably united. (87)

Art is the endeavor to transcend the duality of subject and object by the subjectification of nature and objectification of spirit. Religion is the endeavor to live with the Divine as own with own, as lovers with beloved. (30)

Thus during many centuries the artists of one district apply themselves to the interpretation of the same ideas; the origin of those ideas is more remote than any particular example. The great types are the fruit of communal rather than individual thought. This communal thought however is not only popular thought but that of the greatest and wisest minds of successive generations seeking to impress their vision on a whole race. (6)

In almost every art and craft, as also in music, there exists in Hindustan a complete and friendly fusion of the two cultures. The non-sectarian character of the styles of Indian art has indeed always been conspicuous; so that it is often only by special details that one can distinguish Jain from Buddhist *stupas*, Buddhist from Hindu sculpture, or the Hindu from the Musulman minor crafts. The one great distinction of Mughal from Hindu art is not so much racial as social; the former is an art of courts and connoisseurs, owing much to individual patronage, the latter belongs as much to the folk as to the kings. (6)

I should like to point out that “art” is like “God,” precisely in this respect, that it cannot be seen; all that we can see is *things made by art*, and hence properly called artifacts, and these are analogous to those effects, which are

all that we can see of God. The art remains in the artist, regardless of the vicissitudes to which his works are subject; and I protest against the serious use of the term “art” by a writer who really means “works of art.” (66)

Let us then admit that the greater part of what is taught in the fine arts department of our universities, all of the psychologies of art, all the obscurities of modern aesthetics, are only so much verbiage, only a kind of defence that stands in the way of our understanding of the wholesome art, at the same time iconographically true and practically useful, that was once to be had in the marketplace or from any good artist.... Our aesthetic is nothing but a false rhetoric, and a flattery of human weakness by which we can account only for the arts that have no other purpose than to please. (24)

Things made by art answer to human needs, or else are luxuries. Human needs are the needs of the whole man, who does not live by bread alone. That means that to tolerate insignificant, i.e. meaningless conveniences, however convenient they may be, is beneath our natural dignity; the whole man needs things well and truly made to serve at one and the same time the needs of the active and contemplative life. On the other hand, pleasure taken in things well made is not a need in us independent of our need for the things themselves, but a part of our very nature; pleasure perfects the operation, but is not its end; the purposes of art are wholly utilitarian, in the full sense of the word as it applies to the whole man. We cannot give the name of art to anything irrational. (73)

Just as we desire peace but not the things that make for peace, so we desire art but not the things that make for art. (24)

Our artists are “emancipated” from any obligation to eternal verities, and have abandoned to tradesmen the satisfaction of present needs. Our abstract art is not an iconography of transcendental forms but the realistic picture of a disintegrated mentality. (85)

Our “aesthetic” approach can be compared only to that of a traveler who, when he sees a signpost, proceeds to admire its elegance, asks who made it, and finally cuts it down and takes it home to be used as a mantel-piece ornament. (88)



Detail of inlaid decoration in the Taj Mahal

BEAUTY

Beauty is not in any special or exclusive sense a property of works of art, but much rather a quality or value that may be manifested by all things that are, in proportion to the degree of their actual being and perfection. Beauty may be recognized either in spiritual or material substances, and if in the latter then either in natural objects or in works of art. Its conditions are always the same. (24)

The traditional doctrine of beauty is not developed with respect to artifacts alone, but universally. It is independent of taste. The recognition of beauty depends on judgment, not on sensation; the beauty of the aesthetic surfaces depends on their information, and not upon themselves. The work of art is beautiful, in terms of perfection, or truth and aptitude. Beauty is perfection apprehended as an attractive power; that aspect of the truth, which moves the will to grapple with the theme to be communicated. (58)

The quality of beauty in a work of art is quite independent of its theme. (3)

There are no degrees of beauty: the most complex and the simplest expression remind us of one and the same state. The sonata cannot be more beautiful than the simplest lyric, nor the painting than the drawing merely because of their greater elaboration. A mathematical analogy is found if we consider large and small circles; these differ only in their content, not in their circularity. (3)

As there are two Truths, absolute and relative (*vidaya* and *avidya*), so there are two Beauties, the one absolute or ideal, the other relative and better termed loveliness, because determined by human affections. These two are clearly distinguished in Indian aesthetics. (54)

The vision of beauty is thus an act of pure contemplation, not in the absence of any object of contemplation, but in conscious identification with the object of contemplation. (51)

The vision of beauty is spontaneous, in just the same sense as the inward light of the lover (*bhakta*). It is a state of grace that cannot be achieved by deliberate effort; though perhaps we can remove hindrances to its manifestation, for there are many witnesses that the secret of all art is to be found in self-forgetfulness. And we know that this state of grace is not achieved in the



The Bath, Kangra, 18th century

pursuit of pleasure; the hedonists have their reward, but they are in bondage to loveliness, while the artist is free in beauty. (3)

Hindu writers say that the capacity to feel beauty (to taste *rasa*) cannot be acquired by study, but is the reward of merit gained in a past life; for many good men and would-be historians of art have never perceived it. (3)

Rasa is not an objective quality in art, but a spiritual activity or experience called “tasting” (*asvada*)... arising from a perfected self-identification with the theme, whatever it may have been. This pure and disinterested aesthetic experience, indistinguishable from knowledge of the impersonal *Brahman*, impossible to be described otherwise than an intellectual ecstasy, can be evoked only in the spectator possessing the necessary competence, an inward criterion of truth (*pramana*). (54)

Possessions are a necessity to the extent that we can use them: it is altogether legitimate to enjoy what we do use, but equally inordinate to enjoy what we cannot use or to use what cannot be enjoyed. All possessions not at

Beauty

the same time beautiful and useful are an affront to human dignity. Ours is perhaps the first society to find it natural that some things should be beautiful and others useful. To be voluntarily poor is to have rejected what we cannot both admire and use: this definition can be applied alike to the case of the millionaire and to that of the monk. (21)



The Radiant Beauty, Kangra, 18th century



Mithuna (lovers), carved figures from Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, 11th century

EROS

In India we could not escape the conviction that sexual love has a deep and spiritual significance. There is nothing with which we can better compare the “mystic union” of the finite with its infinite ambient—that one experience which proves itself and is the only ground of faith—than the self-oblivion of earthly lovers locked in each other’s arms, where “each is both.” Physical proximity, contact, and interpenetration are the expressions of love, only because love is the recognition of identity. These two are one flesh, because they have remembered their unity of spirit. This is moreover a fuller identity than the mere sympathy of two individuals, and each as individual has now no more significance for the other than the gates of heaven for one who stands within. It is like an algebraic equation where the equation is the only truth and the terms may stand for anything. The least intrusion of the ego, however, involves a return to the illusion of duality. (3)

In the language of human love the Vaisnava mystics found ready to their hands a most explicit vocabulary of devotion and of union. The ultimate essential of all such devotion is self-forgetfulness and self-surrender, the root of all division is pride and self-will, and therefore the drama of spiritual experience is represented by the love of woman for man. (78)

There is also a great difference between the Eastern and Western attitude towards sexual intercourse; on the one hand the ethic of Hinduism, with its ideals of renunciation, is even severer than that of Roman Catholic Christianity; on the other we have to note that Hinduism embraces and recognizes and idealizes the whole of life. Thus it is that sex relation can be treated frankly and simply in religious and poetic literature and art. In its highest form, the sex relation is a sacrament and even more secularly regarded, it is rather an art than a mere animal gratification. (53)

Indian sex-symbolism assumes two main forms, the recognition of which will assist the student of art; first, the desire and union of individuals, sacramental in its likeness to the union of the individual soul with God. This is the love of the herd-girls for Krishna; and second, the creation of the world, manifestation, *Lila*, as the fruit of the union of male and female cosmic principles—*Purusa* and *Sakti*. (6)



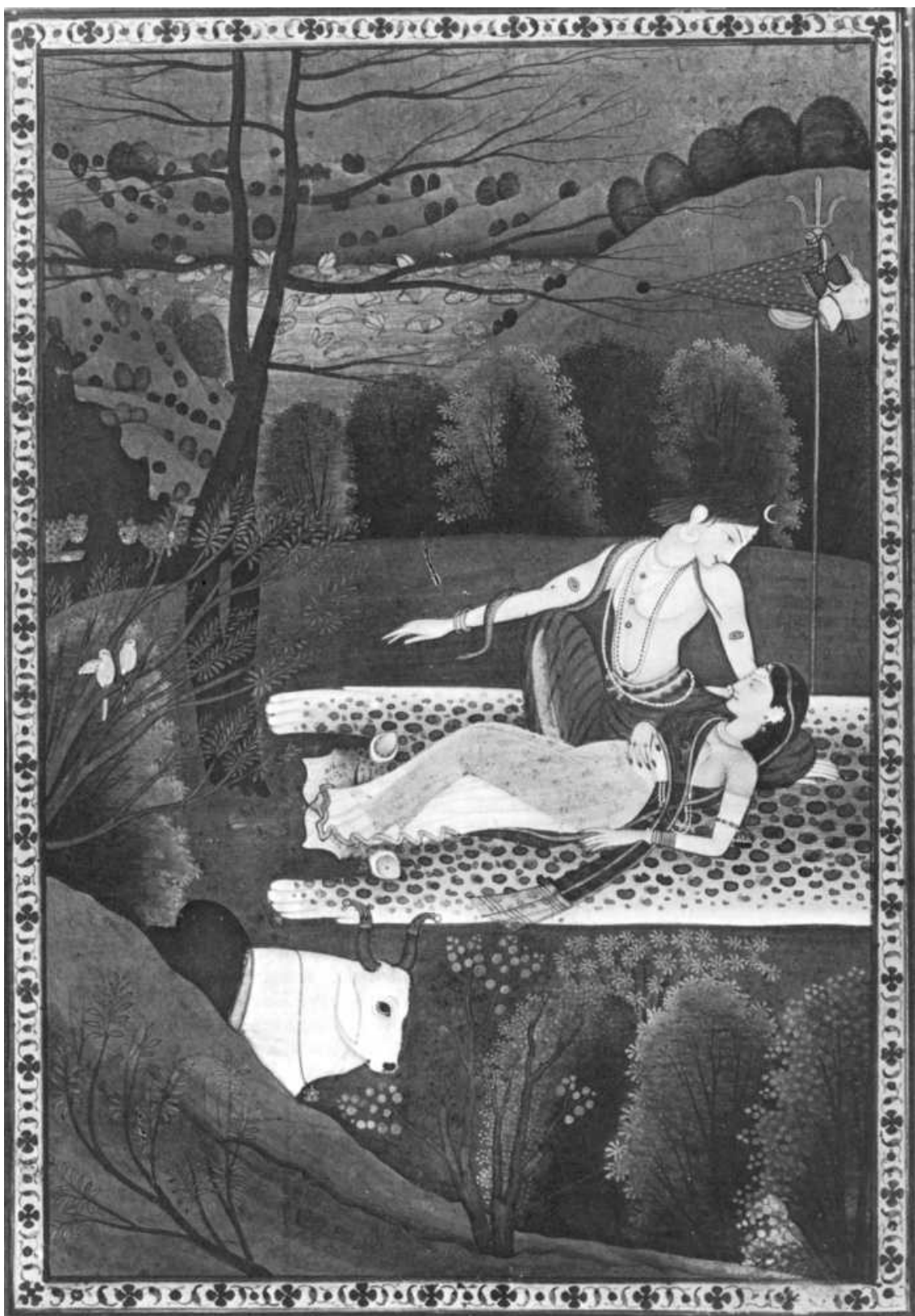
Krishna and Radha, Kangra, 18th century

The two (lovers) are one flesh because they have remembered their unity of spirit. (*)

There is scarcely a single female figure represented in early Indian art without erotic suggestion on some kink, implied or explicitly expressed and emphasized. (*)

The mysticism of oriental art is always expressed in definite forms. India is wont to suggest the eternal and inexpressible infinities in terms of sensuous beauty. The love of man for woman or for nature are one with his love for God. (49)

In nearly all Indian art there runs a vein of deep sex-mysticism; not merely are female forms felt to be equally appropriate with male to adumbrate the majesty of the over-soul, but the interplay of all psychic and sexual forces is felt in itself to be religious. Here is no thought that passion is degrading but a frank recognition of the close analogy between amorous and religious ecstasy. It is thus that the imager, speaking always for the race rather than of personal idiosyncrasies, set side by side on his cathedral walls the *yogi* and the *apsara*, the saint and the ideal courtesan; accepting life as he saw it, he interpreted all its phenomena with perfect catholicity of vision. Such figures and indeed all sculptural embroidery of Indian temples are confined to the exterior walls of the shrine, which is absolutely plain within. Such is the veil of nature's empirical life, enshrining one, not contradicted or identified into variety. (6)



Siva and Parvati, Rajput (Pahari), early 19th century