

5 A.K. Coomaraswamy and Japan

A tentative overview

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Créer un mythe, c'est-à-dire entrevoir derrière la réalité sensible une réalité supérieure, est le signe le plus manifeste de la grandeur de l'âme humaine et la preuve de sa faculté de croissance et de développement infinies.
A. Sabatier, 1879,

Exergue, *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists*, 1913

1 Prologue: Okakura and the Bengal renaissance

On the occasion of his last stay in Japan in 1929, Rabindranath Tagore is known to have paid a posthumous tribute to Okakura Tenshin (Kakuzō). Recalling Okakura's stay in Bengal from 1901 to 1902, the poet stated, '[Okakura] would often buy some very cheap things, like simple clay oil-pots that peasants use, with ecstasy of admiration, some things in which we had failed to realize the instinct for beauty'.¹ The author of *The Book of Tea* (1906), Okakura was skilled at discovering unknown beauty in foreign lands and singling out that beauty from its original context. Just as Japanese tea masters highly appreciated Korean rice bowls even though they had been produced for everyday popular use. Okakura also highly valued inexpensive, everyday Indian utensils, appreciating them 'with [an] ecstasy of admiration'. Ceramics and clay wares were not highly valued in India. However, Japanese tea masters treasured even such cheap wares once they were brought from abroad and put into the meditative, aesthetic context produced by the tea ceremony. Okakura also believed that 'in the Orient' no clear distinction existed between the higher arts and lower arts. Such a hierarchical value judgement may have been relevant in the West, but not always in the East, he thought. A.K. Coomaraswamy (A.K.C.) would have readily agreed.

Okakura visited India for the first time from 1901 to 1902. During his stay, he produced a manuscript that would be published as *The Ideals of the East* (1903). Sister Nivedita not only wrote the preface for the volume, but also took care of the manuscript so that Okakura's original intent was

respected by the British editor. In response, Okakura also expressed his appreciation of Sister Nivedita's writing. At the beginning of his *The Book of Tea*, we read, 'It is rarely that the chivalrous pen of a Lafcadio Hearn or that of the author of *The Web of Indian Life* enlivens the Oriental darkness with the torch of our own sentiments'.² Ernest Binfield Havell's book *The Ideals of Indian Art* (1911), which was published amidst the political circumstances of the Swadeshi Movement, clearly owes its title to Okakura's notion of 'ideals'.³ A.K.C. was also under the spell of the same idea. It is well known that his famous essay on 'The Aims of Indian Art' (1908) contains a quote from *The Ideals of the East*. In this manifest, A.K.C. declares:

But 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 unity that underlies all its bewildering variety. This unifying principle here is also idealism, and this must of necessity have been so, for the synthesis of Indian thought is one, not many.⁴

The idea of oneness, or *advaita* in the Vedanta tradition, had been absorbed by Okakura, who had paraphrased it in his *The Ideals of the East* to outline Japanese art history in global and Asian contexts. Okakura wrote,

Thus Japan is a museum of Asiatic civilisation; and yet more than a museum, because the singular genius of the race leads it to dwell on all phases of the ideals of the past, in that spirit of living Advaitism which welcomes the new without losing the old.⁵

Then, Okakura reinterprets this originally Indian idea clearly in terms of Huayan (Jp. Kegon) thinking, adding,

The history of Japanese art becomes thus the history of Asiatic ideals—the beach where each successive wave of Eastern thought has left its sand-ripple as it beat against the national consciousness. Yet I linger with dismay on the threshold of an attempt to make an intelligible summary of those art-ideals. For art, like the diamond net of Indra, reflects the whole chain in every link.⁶

2 'Asia is One' and *Advaita*

It is well known that *The Ideals of the East* begins with the phrase 'Asia is one'. This phrase caused much controversy in Japan, especially after its 1945 World War II defeat. Okakura was accused of acting as a propagandist who had promoted the infamous pan-Asianism of the war era. By criticising Okakura, post-war Japanese intellectuals tried to exonerate themselves from their own guilty consciences. Was Okakura's declaration in 1902 synonymous with the political ideology of Japan's imperial expansionism that

aimed to establish the 'Greater Asian Prosperity Sphere' in the 1940s? Was 'Asia is one' the very core of Okakura's entire thought?

Let me briefly give my hypotheses regarding these issues. Firstly, 'Asia is one' was a friendly address by Okakura to his Indian colleagues at the dawn of the Swadeshi Movement. Secondly, the idea of 'oneness' or *advaita* was transmitted to Okakura by Swami Vivekananda during their encounter, upon Okakura's arrival in India. Sister Nivedita, a devoted disciple of Vivekananda who had just published her *Kali the Mother*, oversaw the editing of Okakura's manuscript during his stay in India.⁷ Hence, she recognized as being 'of supreme value' Okakura's view of Asia 'as a united living organism, each part dependent on all the other, the whole breathing a single complex life'.⁸ Thirdly, up until his English writings were finally translated into Japanese in the late 1930s, Okakura had little impact on the Japanese political (and intellectual) scene. Okakura's English writings were to be politically manipulated after his death in ways for which he can hardly be held responsible.⁹

I posit that the idea of oneness in Asia was also a valuable notion for A.K.C., especially when he was actively engaged in the Ceylon Social Reformation Society. In his pioneering work on *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art* (1908), in which Okakura's work is referred to, A.K.C. insists upon Ceylon's cultural unity with India:

There is scarcely any part of Sinhalese life, or religion or art, which is quite comprehensible without reference to India; the Sinhalese themselves are Indians. ... India without Ceylon is incomplete, for in many ways, Ceylon is a more perfect window through which to gaze on India's past.¹⁰

This pan-Indianism is somehow counterbalanced by Okakura's cultural pan-Asianism. Obviously, both of them emerged from nationalist movements in a modernizing Asia. The infamous 'Partition of Bengal' fostered 'ideals' of unification in A.K.C. In celebration of these 'ideals', A.K.C. reminds us in *A Book of Homage to Shakespeare* that was published during World War I, 'Asiatic thought again affirms the unity and interdependence of all life, at the moment when Europe begins to realize that the Fruit of Life is not easily attainable in a society based upon division'.¹¹

The will to defend Asian unity under the political reality of Western expansionism clearly cast a shadow over art history scholarship during WWI and the 1920s. The nationalistic depreciation of the Gandhara statues was one of the main controversial issues. In the aforementioned work, A.K.C. is clear and outspoken about his position on this issue:

It is the concentration of attention upon the effeminate and artistically unimportant work of the Gandhara School that has given undue prominence to the Greek influence. It must be admitted also that a certain

prejudice has led European investigators to think of classic Greek naturally as the source of all Art, and to suppose that the influence of classic Art have been as permanently important in the East as in the West.¹²

This very phrase was quoted extensively in a review article written by Sister Nivedita.¹³ Let me add that from this discourse emerged Ernest Binfield Havell's idea of 'essential Indianness' vis-à-vis Greek influence. In an essay, 'Buddhist Primitives', included in his 1918 book *The Dance of Siva*, A.K.C. maintains the same basic position:

Gandhara sculpture cannot be regarded as primitive and autochthonous Buddhist Art; it has not been necessary to emphasize also how little the smug and complacent features of the Gandhara Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and their listless and effeminate gestures, reflect the intellectual vigour or the devotional passion of Buddhist thought.¹⁴

3 Early Japanese reception of A.K.C.

Okakura passed away in 1913. The following year, *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists*, a posthumous work by Sister Nivedita, was published. In the preface, A.K.C., her co-author, recognizes Nivedita as one of the 'lovers of Indian Ideals', and declares that her books became an

inspiration of a new race of Indian students, no longer anxious to be Anglicized, but convinced that all real progress, as distinct from mere political controversy, must be based on national ideals, upon intentions already clearly expressed in religion and arts.¹⁵

The book is richly illustrated with no less than 32 high-quality, colour reproductions by Abanindro Nath Tagore, Nanda Lal Bose and others, depicting scenes from epic mythologies. In this volume A.K.C. completed Sister Nivedita's unfinished work by including 'all those illiterate but wise peasants and women whose knowledge of the *purāṇas* has been gained by listening to recitations or reading, by visiting temples (where stories are illustrated in sculpture), or from folk-songs or mystery-plays'.¹⁶ This choice was faithful to the dream Sister Nivedita has wished to realize shortly before her untimely death:¹⁷ to rehabilitate classical literature through the English transcription of oral vernacular histories, a project closely linked with the coupling of 'religion and arts'.

In her classic study, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920*, Tapati Guha-Thakurta aptly summarizes this as follows:

In Coomaraswamy, as in Okakura, Orientalism acquired more decidedly nationalistic overtones, rooting itself in the patriotic fervour of a rejuvenated Japan, or a deep crisis of self-identity at the denationalization

of Ceylon. Nivedita, through her direct participation in the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, could most effectively harness these ideas in the project of a nationalist 'renaissance' of Indian art.¹⁸

With the establishment of the Anglo-Japan Alliance in 1902, followed by the Russo-Japan War (1904–5), Japanese nationalism took a clear turn (towards becoming that of an imperial power). Japan's victory over Russia drastically modified its position in the world. As a result, Okakura no longer found it possible to publish his manuscript of anti-British political manifesto declaring his solidarity with Indian intellectuals.

Three years after Okakura's death, Kōryō-sha, a Tokyo press, published a Japanese translation of A.K.C.'s voluminous work, *The Arts & Crafts of India and Ceylon* (originally published in 1913). The Japanese title of this work, which was translated by Sobu Ryokurō and Iwasaki Masumi, was *Indo bijutsu-shi*. In the preface, A.K.C. concludes that Indians did not believe in art for art's sake; as was the case of medieval Europe, their art was art for love's sake. They made no distinction between the sacred and the profane. A.K.C. delighted in the fact that the Indian social system did not aim at the development of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number', and that Indians did not pursue consciously an ideal of beauty. For him, fine art did not appear from the conscious intention to create beautiful painting or poetry. On the contrary, it is the result of an impulse to express, with clear instinct, life and death. This summary of the Japanese translation sufficiently shows that A.K.C.'s basic conviction was faithfully transmitted to the Japanese readership.¹⁹

In 1917, Taki Seiichi, chair of the Art History Department of Tokyo Imperial University, mentioned in his article 'The Recent Criticism on the Gandhara Art' the names 'Coomaraswamy and Havell'.²⁰ Taki remarked that in recent scholarship Gandhara art had lost its credibility as the representative of Indian Art and that 'neo-nationalists' were shifting their attention to other 'genuine Indian art'. Clearly, Taki was well informed about the recent shift in the appreciation of the Gandhara sculptures within scholarship on Indian art history.

By then, Taki had taken over the role of chief editor of the periodical, *Kokka*, founded by Okakura in 1890. As I have analysed elsewhere, *Kokka* published, in the very year of Okakura's death in 1913, a slanderous, anonymous miscellanea criticizing Okakura's endeavours.²¹ The publication of such an article would not have been possible were it not for the chief editor's permission. Taki himself also harshly critiqued Okakura's scholarship on Indian art history. In his critiques, Taki relied upon a British authority of the field, Vincent Smith, who had earlier published a diatribe against Okakura. Smith writes,

A Japanese author has come to the strange conclusion that 'a deeper and more informed study of the works of Gandhara itself will reveal a greater prominence of Chinese than of so-called Greek influence. ...

It would not be worthwhile to notice Mr. Okakura's rash assertions, but for the attention that his book has received in certain quarters.²²

Around this time, Taki also ambitiously sent an expedition to Ajanta for the purpose of making copies of the cave paintings there.²³ While slandering the Bengal modern painting exhibited in Japan (an initiative mounted by Okakura) as 'small and sentimental art in atrophy', Taki declared that Japan had to take initiative in the academic investigation of vestiges of ancient Indian pictorial art. According to him, the technical affinity of the Indian murals and the Japanese Buddhist fresco relics would justify Japan's academic prerogatives.²⁴ Taki's competitive enmity towards Western scholarship also reveals his arrogant pride and disdainful sense of superiority toward neighbouring Asian nations. In his writings, one can detect the typical reverse 'colonial Orientalism' of the Japanese Empire unconsciously revealing itself. And yet it would be unfair to Taki for us to overlook his scholarly contribution in transmitting, via his English translations, Chinese classical treatises. Indeed, his translations helped Western scholars discover Chinese aesthetics.²⁵ While in Boston, A.K.C. also consulted Taki's work as well as the English edition of *Kokka* magazine.²⁶

4 The rehabilitation of medievalism in a colonial context

One letter included in Okakura's *Complete Works* documents an appointment that he tried to make with A.K.C. while they were both in London.²⁷ Nevertheless, we don't know if they actually met. No letter from Okakura has so far been included in A.K.C.'s published correspondence. However, the latter did meet, when he gave a lecture in Tokyo in 1920,²⁸ another important Japanese aesthetician: Yanagi Muneyoshi (1889–1961), known as the founder of the *Mingei* or the Popular Craft Movement. (Figure 5.1)

Though it seems to have been their only encounter, a comparison of the two merits attention; apart from the fact that, inspired by the work of William Morris, both were interested in the rehabilitation of popular handicrafts,²⁹ they also had a strong affinity for appreciating arts in close connection with religious experiences.³⁰

Yet the most basic connection came through their shared colonial situation. Strikingly, Yanagi was led to discover popular crafts through his contact with Korea, which was 'annexed' by Japan in 1910, following the latter's victory over Russia in 1905. A.K.C.'s investigation into Indian and Sinhalese arts and crafts under British rule parallels Yanagi's discovery of 'popular crafts' in the Korean peninsula under Japanese rule. While immediately after its victory over Russia, Japan became the object of Asian nations' hopes as a 'rising sun', the country's colonial policy soon began, especially after World War I, to show hideous similarities with the exploitative policies pursued by Western colonial powers. In 1919, the March 1



Figure 5.1 Yanagi Muneyoshi. Courtesy of the Nihon Mingeikan, Japan Folk-Art Museum, Komaba, Tokyo.

Independence Movement (then disdainfully called the 'Banzai Incident' in Japan) occurred in Korean Peninsula. Japanese colonial authorities began a campaign of repression, resulting in massacres with a high number of deaths and casualties (the official record lists 7507 people as killed in the turmoil).

After this 'incident', Yanagi expressed his sympathy for the cruelties the Korean people had endured in their history (presented in his 'A Letter to my Korean/Choson Friends' [1920]). In 'My Thought on Korean/Choson People' (1920), Yanagi recognized Korean resentment as legitimate and the 'ideal of independence' as a necessary consequence of their 'resistance, hatred and secession'. At the same time Yanagi, as an aesthetician, believed in the 'intimate understanding of religion and arts' as 'the deepest way to comprehend another nation'. He developed his method of artistic appreciation that identified the 'sign of sorrow and remorse' 'in the lines of Choson ceramics'. Following the colonial government's decision to demolish the historically significant Kwang-fa Mun gate, located at the entrance of the Korean Imperial Palace, Yanagi published a pathetic farewell address to it (Figure 5.2).



Figure 5.2 Kwanfa Mung Gate. Postcard image, ca 1920s, Collection of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, Kyoto.

Writing as if the event were a funeral, he stated, 'Your fate is coming to an end... and yet, those who wish to save your life from death are sentenced to treason'.³¹

Obviously, Yanagi's position on the side of the 'colonizer' cannot escape criticism. As Guha-Thakurta remarked regarding Ernest Binfield Havell in Bengal:

Havell's defense and reinterpretation of Indian art history remained enmeshed in the paternalistic obligations of the ruler toward the ruled. Even as he repeatedly underlined his opposition to British art administration in India and Western scholarship on Indian art, he continued to define his alternative commitments within the framework of Empire.³²

This criticism may be easily applied to Yanagi by replacing 'British' with 'Japanese'.

And yet, the final sentence of his warning to his 'Japanese comrade' is noteworthy: 'Our Japanese comrade, listen. All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword'.³³ This biblical saying was also cited by A.K.C. with variations in the contemporaneous Indian context:

There is serious danger that the degradation of Asia will ultimately menace the security of European social idealism... and that would be a strange nemesis if European post-Industrialists should ultimately be defeated by an Industrialism of Imperialism of European origin established in the East!³⁴

Japanese colonial rule in the Korean Peninsula was reproducing the same 'nemesis' by awkwardly mimicking the British model in India. 'Victory breeds hatred, because the conquered are unhappy' is a lesson A.K.C. quotes from *Dhammapada*,³⁵ and he adds (without giving the source): 'The Iron hand crushed the tyrant's head / And became a tyrant in his stead' (quoting William Blake).

'Battles are lost in the same spirit in which they are won', as Walt Whitman said.³⁶ Therefore, notes A.K.C., 'every oppressed nationality oppresses some other or embraces the oppression of class by class'.³⁷ Yanagi preached the same warning and lesson to his Japanese compatriots: 'If you respect your own freedom, why not respect the freedom of the other? If we violate this obvious human ethic, the world shall be your enemy. If so, it shall not be Korea but Japan that perishes'.³⁸ Replacing Japan with Europe, one can see A.K.C. made the same observation: 'If Asia be not with Europe, she will be against her, and there may arise a terrible conflict, economic, or even armed, between an idealistic Europe and a materialized Asia'.³⁹ Revealingly enough, Japanese militarism became this 'materialized Asia', while Japanese society duplicated its oppression toward colonized Korea as well as intensified the 'oppression of class by class' within the Japanese Empire.

Ironically enough, it was in 1919 that 'Asia is one' became a common slogan of those Asian nations that mounted insurrections against colonial oppression. (Beside India, China also saw the May forth Movement against Japan). 'Asia is one' was realized in the cosmopolitan (if not 'transnational') intellectual environment that emerged after the Versailles Treaty.

5 Ideals of arts and crafts under the colonial conditions

India affords the most tragic spectacle of the world, since we see there a living and magnificent organization, akin to, but infinitely more complete than that of mediaeval Europe, still in the process of destruction. ... A single generation of English education suffices to break the threads of tradition and to create a nondescript and superficial being deprived of all roots—a sort of intellectual pariah who do not belong to the East or the West, the past or the future. The greatest danger for India is the loss of her spiritual integrity.⁴⁰

One can substitute these phrases by A.K.C. in 1918 for the remarks Yanagi made in Korea when, in 1920, he closely observed the artistic education received there by Korean female pupils. Japanese teachers proudly showed him, as exemplary model cases, pieces of huge broiery, deprived of Korean influences: 'lacking in elegance and taste, just a half imitation of the Western-style model of the Japanese foolish contemporary fabric'.⁴¹ Yanagi resentfully regretted 'the crime of wrong education', which ignores tradition and he felt 'sorry for the loss of Korean genuine beauty'.⁴² Indeed, 'we shall

accomplish nothing by pressing anything in mould' as A.K.C. put it.⁴³ Let me note, however, that my juxtaposition of these quotes are not intended to save Yanagi from his condescending positioning of himself as a colonizer.⁴⁴ Instead, this parallel allows us to examine the genesis of the idea of 'popular craft', on one hand, and invites us, on the other, to investigate a concrete case of artistic dialogue that took place between Korea and India surrounding the creation of handicrafts.

A.K.C. highly valued the guild system in India and compared it with the case of medieval Europe.

The caste system... of which the lines are drawn at once ethnically and culturally (not pecuniarily), represents an integration (not a division) of society in vocational groups... only for the fulfillment of their 'own function.' ... [These] 'vocational groups' [were] directly founded on the instinct of workmanship and the inheritance of aptitude.⁴⁵

Referring to Sir George Birdwood's work on *Industrial Arts in India*, A.K.C. insisted on the 'guild socialism' that was prevalent in a 'non-competitive society'.⁴⁶ He added, 'The artificier (*Silapan*) was also protected from competition and undercutting'. A similar description is easily found in Yanagi's writings in search of the medieval ideal of craftsmanship.⁴⁷

Yanagi and his colleagues published a pamphlet 'Prospectus of the Foundation of the Japan Popular Craft Museum' in 1926. In a parallel move, Yanagi established the Association for Folk Craft in Kamigamo, Kyoto the following year. He put forward 'Discipline, Surrender, and Communion' (in English in the original) as guiding principles, in reference to monastic orders existing in both the East and West. Thereby, Yanagi intended to 'overcome the misleading conclusions of William Morris', who, according to him, 'failed to correctly grasp the spirit of "popular craft"'. Yanagi emphasized the importance of 'practical usage', which craftsmen/women keep in mind in their work. The resulting beauty is a manifestation of such practical usage, said Yanagi, and the essence of 'crafts' consists of the harmonious combination of 'usage' and 'beauty'.⁴⁸

Yanagi continues by arguing, 'The beauty of a recipient (or receptacle-base) [*utsuwa*] is created by its service for the user, and gains significance thanks to the passion and love of the user. From this mutual love is born the beauty of crafts'. For this reason, even mediocre craftsmen/women can attain craft beauty when he or she is free from individuality or egocentrism. Therefore, unknown craftsmen/women unconsciously enjoy advantages over famous individuals and renowned artists. Indeed, selflessness is proof that craftsmen/women bestowed with it are already on their way to salvation. And the craft can be realized only in 'cooperation' with others in 'innocent absorption'. However, such free creation and faithfulness to work have been lost to the bad habits of capitalism. Working conditions should be modified. Manual labour should again be filled with positive value and signification (Yanagi's statements as they are summarized by Mizuo).⁴⁹

6 Shinran and Nietzsche

In the conclusion of *The Way of Craft*, Yanagi quotes from a famous Buddhist monk, Shinran (1173–1263), who used to say: 'If even a good man can attain salvation, then why not the bad man?'⁵⁰ It is striking that a similar upside-down idea is also formulated by A.K.C. in his remarks on Nietzsche.⁵¹ According to him, Nietzsche's doctrine of 'do what you will' is 'neither egotistic nor altruistic'. 'True and ideal selfishness consists in always watching over and restraining the soul, so that our productiveness may come to a beautiful termination.' 'We shall never comprehend the selfishness which Nietzsche and other mystics praise, if we interpret it according to the lights of those who believe that all actions should be *praiseworthy*'. According to Yanagi, Shinran's 'good man' is still prisoner of '*praiseworthy-ness*', in as much as he feels himself not guilty. However, Shinran's 'bad man' is 'beyond good and evil' so long as he knows that he is not *praiseworthy*. Thus, to use A.K.C.'s expressions, 'ideal selfishness' is 'more generous than any altruism'.

'Far... from a doctrine of self-indulgence', says A.K.C., Nietzsche's 'ideal selfishness' is 'a form of asceticism or ardour (*tapas*)'. This is almost synonymous with Yanagi's ideal vision of the 'unknown craftsman'. A.K.C. continues, 'The activity of genius is not an obedience to rules, but dedication of life to what is commanded from within, even though it should appear to all others as evil'. Likewise, Yanagi also locates the ideal of the craft as existing beyond beauty and ugliness. Made of 'no-minded-ness' and 'no-thought', 'objects of everyday life' (*getemono*) are beyond good or evil yet 'representations of nature itself'; not the fabrications of the individual's will but a product of an 'other's will' (*tariki*).⁵² Here 'genius' is also deprived of its usual connotation. Those who wish to be recognized as 'genius' can never attain the Ideal. Indeed, 'the highest attainment and purpose of humanity is the most difficult thing for self-assertive minds to grasp'.⁵³ And it is in the lack of the 'self-assertive mind' beyond the 'self-indulgence' that Yanagi defines his ideal of the 'unknown craftsmen'.

The only and decisive contrast between the two may reside in Yanagi's attitude of resignation typical of Japanese Buddhism, which may be located, in appearance at least, at the antipode of Nietzsche's quest for the *Uebermensch* or 'superman'. Nonetheless, both thinkers agree on one point. As A.K.C. states in his 'Status of Indian Women', 'the way of ego-assertion cannot be a royal road to realization of the Self'.⁵⁴ This is because 'all that is best for us comes of itself into our hand—but if we strive to overtake it, it perpetually eludes us'.⁵⁵

7 Asakawa Takumi, Gurcharan Singh and James Cousins

'Siva is a destroyer and loves the burning ground', says A.K.C. in his 'The Dance of Siva'. In the footnote we find the following teaching:

Make room for your soul and for other souls. Destroy, because all creation proceeds from destruction. ... For all building up is done with

debris, and nothing in the world is new but shapes. But the shapes must be perpetually destroyed. ... Break every cup from which you drink.⁵⁶

This violent order clearly contrasts from Okakura's cherishing a clay pot as a metonymical receptacle of his idea of the 'cup of humanity'. Fire can destroy clay wares. But without fire the clay ware cannot be shaped. The void within makes room for souls to dwell.

In *The Book of Tea*, Okakura famously declares,

The usefulness of a water pitcher dwelt in the emptiness where water might be put, not in the form of the pitcher or the material of which it was made. Vacuum is all-potent because all-containing. In vacuum alone motion becomes possible. One who could make of himself a vacuum into which other might freely enter would become master of all situations.⁵⁷

How is it possible to reconcile these two apparently opposed statements, between shaping and destroying? Is there any possibility of 'uniting the virility of European youth and the serenity of Asiatic age' (to borrow metaphorically A.K.C.'s utterance out of its initial context)?⁵⁸ Let us search for a possible reply to this question in a friendship fostered in Korea between a Japanese and an Indian.

Takumi Asakawa (1891–1931), who introduced Yanagi to the study of Korean ceramics, is known to have taken a picture with an Indian named Singh. The unique photo was offered to Singh by Asakawa with a personal dedication dated 31 August 1920 (Figure 5.3).

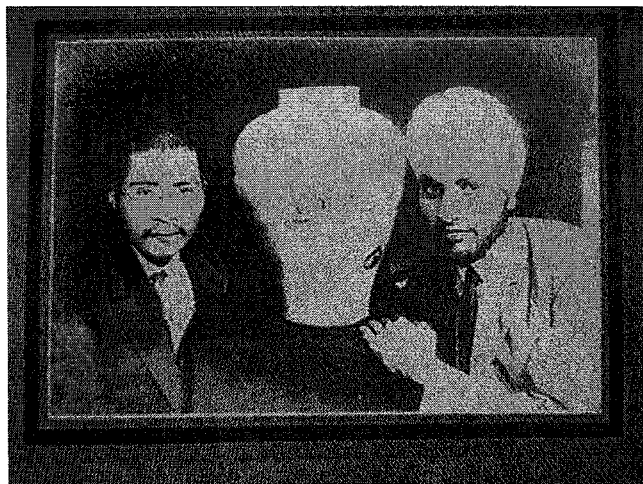
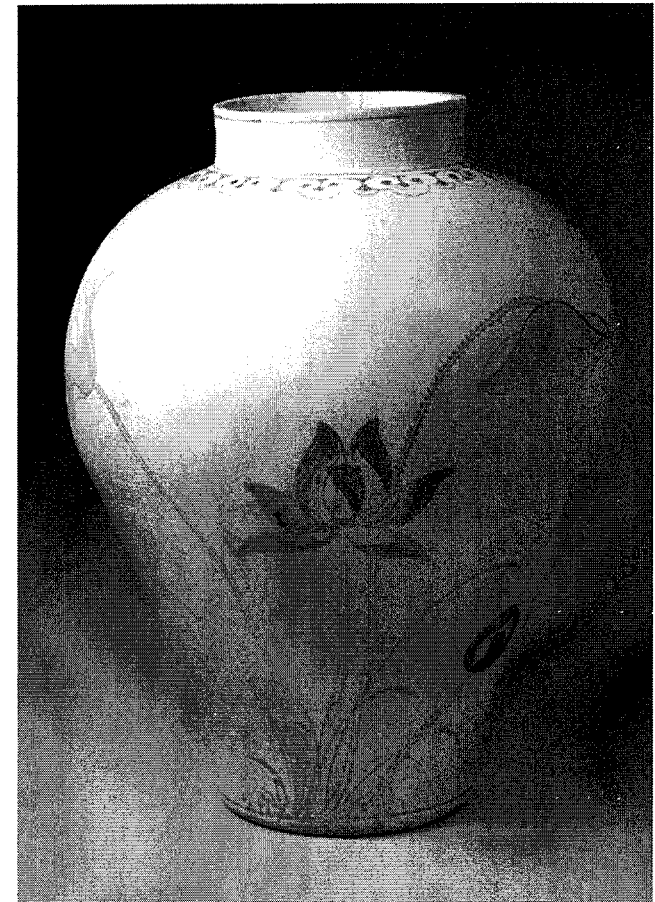


Figure 5.3 Asakawa Takumi (1891–1931) and Sardar Gurcharan Singh (1896–1995). Portrait photo, former collection S.G. Singh.

In the picture, between the two is placed a Korean white porcelain piece, now a treasured item at the Museum of Oriental Ceramics, Osaka (Figure 5.4).

The piece has been frequently exhibited as a historical masterpiece in several exhibitions held by the Popular Crafts Movement. The Indian was recently identified as Sardar Gurcharan Singh (1896–1995) (hereafter G.S.), one of the pioneers of modern Indian pottery.⁵⁹ Student records attest that he was admitted to the Department of Ceramics at the Tokyo Superior Institute of Technology (1920–21). After graduating from the Prince of Wales University (where he studied geology, as did A.K.C. in England) and having completed an apprenticeship in ceramics, G.S. came to Japan during the



青花辰砂蓮花文壺 | 18世紀後半
高 44.3cm 安宅英一氏寄贈、大阪市立東洋陶磁美術館蔵

Figure 5.4 *Sinaber motif vase, Blue Flower*, second half of the 18th century. Former collection Yanagi Muneyoshi, Collection of the Osaka Oriental Ceramic Museum.

summer of 1919, immediately after the infamous Amritsar Massacre which took place on 13 April of that year.

As an Indian and Sikh who must have had been very shocked by the Amritsar Massacre, G.S. could not have been indifferent to the massacre of the March 3 Incident in Korea in 1919. Yanagi wrote to Bernard Leach on 31 October 1920 that he had talked about 'the Korean Questions' with his colleagues.⁶⁰ It is plausible that G.S. was involved in these conversations as a person named "Sing" is mentioned in the letter. In 1924, G.S., who had returned to India in 1922, made a donation of 100 yen to the newly founded Korean Popular Art Museum, inaugurated by Yanagi's initiative. The exceptional sum, despite his modest income, shows his personal devotion to the project of promoting popular crafts in Korea.

During his stay in Japan, G.S. was active in the Tokyo branch of the Theosophy Society, which James Cousins, coming from India, strongly promoted. In a poem that Cousins published in the newspaper *Japan Advertiser*, he praises the potter. He opined that God creates human beings from clay and that they return to soil after death. The potter unconsciously repeats the same process of transmigration. Thus the potter's work is the most sublime. The circle of shaping and destroying also reminds us of *Genesis* in the *Old Testament*. The soil, containing and being the container of the soul, also transmigrates. Thus Christianity and Buddhism collaborate to praise Divine Creation....⁶¹

James Cousins also highly praised G.S.' pottery, made in Japan, as he saw in the pieces the synthesis of India, Korea, and Japan in ceramic ware creation. It seems that G.S. was able to use the kiln at the Seto Pottery School in 1921. The archival record shows that G.S.' whereabouts and behaviour were constantly reported to the police and the Ministry of Interior during his stay in Seto. Despite the fact, he enjoyed friendships not only with Japanese in the *Garakuta* (bric-à-brac) Gathering but also with other globetrotters, including dubious secret agents. He was also half-jokingly nicknamed *Shūryū-ji Shishi-Bonsatsu Shingu* 鷲龍寺獅子梵刹シング or 'Tiger Singh Brahman of Eagle-Dragon-Temple', based on his family's protective divinity.

8 Dance of Siva as the fire, and the clay in the kiln

Let us finally interpret G.S.'s discovery of the Korean pottery in the light of A.K.C.'s aesthetic reflection. In his 'Dance of Siva', A.K.C. quotes from *Unmai Vilakkam*: 'The silent sages destroying the threefold bond are established where their selves are destroyed. There they behold the sacred and are filled with bliss'.⁶² This deliverance cannot be attained without sacrificing the 'self' (Figure 5.5).

The dance of Siva is a fire of destruction; 'the place where the ego is destroyed signifies the state where illusions and deeds are burnt away: this is the crematorium, the burning ground where *Sri Natarāja* dances'.

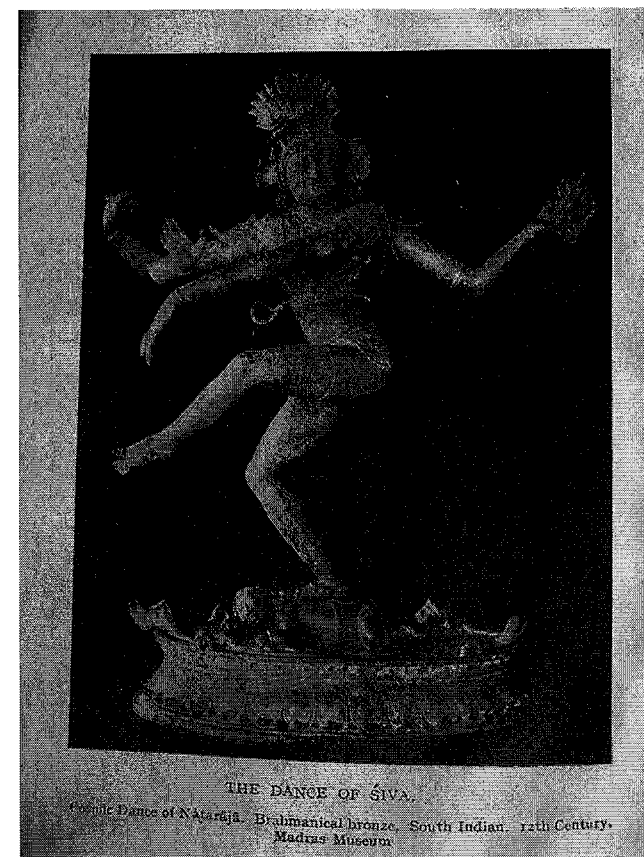


Figure 5.5 *The Dance of Siva, Cosmic Dance of Nataraja*, Brahmanical bronze, South India, 12th Century, Madras Museum (reproduced from Frontispiece. AKC *The Dance of Shiva* 1924).

Tiruvâtâvurâr Purânam also says: 'Our Lord is the Dancer, who, like the heat latent in firewood, diffused His power in mind and matter, and makes them dance in their turn'.⁶³ With this A.K.C. links the thought of Meister Eckhart: 'Just as the fire infuses the essence and clearness into the dry wood, so has God done with man'.

This was also a metaphor for a potter's kiln; the fire infuses the essence and the soil is formed into a solid shape. A Japanese scholar in esoteric Buddhism, Okamoto Kan'ei, notices in these passages quoted by A.K.C. a clear echo of Nietzsche's idealism: 'Opening up a world beyond pessimism and optimism; here is the joy of the material which transforms itself through destruction into eternity'.⁶⁴ In the previous chapter, so as to justify

his reference to Nietzsche, Okamoto also quotes from *Mahâbhârata* and picks up Krishna's famous advice to Arjuna: 'Concentrate on your work, and do not worried about is consequence. Do not be seduced by inaction. For those who realize inner deliberation, there is neither Good nor Evil anymore' (Figure 5.6).⁶⁵

In his 'The Dance of Siva', A.K.C. mentions 'the fire which "changes" not "destroys"'.⁶⁶ This passage is paraphrased by Okamoto as follows: 'The Dance of Natarâja by Siva signifies a space which vibrates according to the alternation of the drum. His fire does not really annihilate everything, but it shows the phase of flux, fluidity'.⁶⁷ He adds: 'The rhythm he treads... ignites in our soul an immortal torch'.⁶⁸ Further

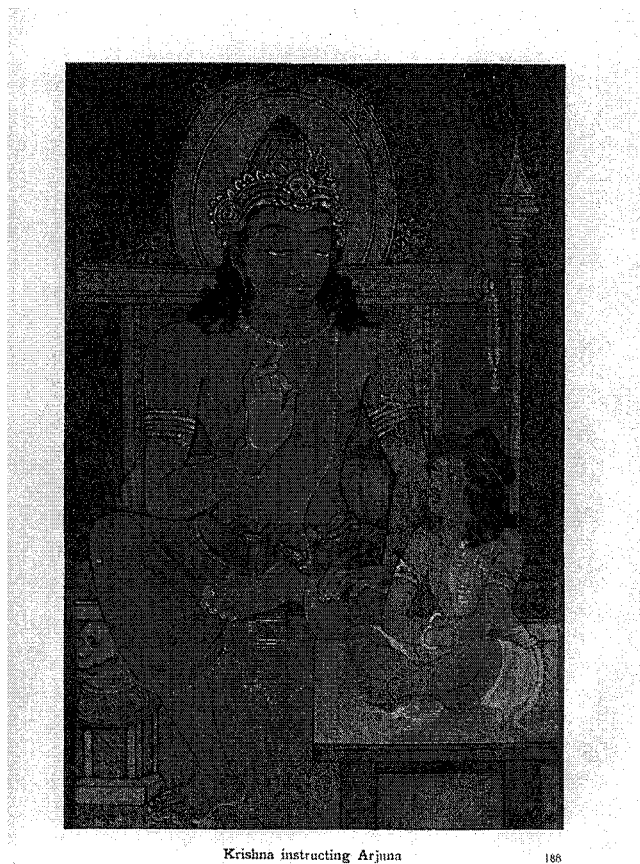


Figure 5.6 "Krishna instructing Arjuna" by Surendra Nath Kar (reproduced from *Myths of Hindus & Buddhists*, 1913, p. 189).

following A.K.C., the Japanese Buddhist scholar not only quotes Kâlî worship in Bengali prose but also Skrybin's *Poem of Ecstasy* (1917), which was inspired by this Hindu sacred figure: 'By a general conflagration (*mahâ-pralaya*) the universe (*samsara*) is embraced / The Spirit is at the height of being, and He feels the tide unending / Of the divine power (*sakti*) of free will'.⁶⁹

Yanagi, in praise of Korean pottery, also states in recollection:

They (pieces of Korean ceramics) are the spontaneous pulsations of life, recalling the natural rhythm of the winds that blow, the streams that flow, and the clouds that rise into the air. They could be called a direct manifestation of the natural life lived by those who made the pots, of the placid frame of mind in which they rose and lay down in harmony with nature.⁷⁰

And it was none other than G.S. who conveyed this kiln fire from Korea back to India (Figure 5.7).

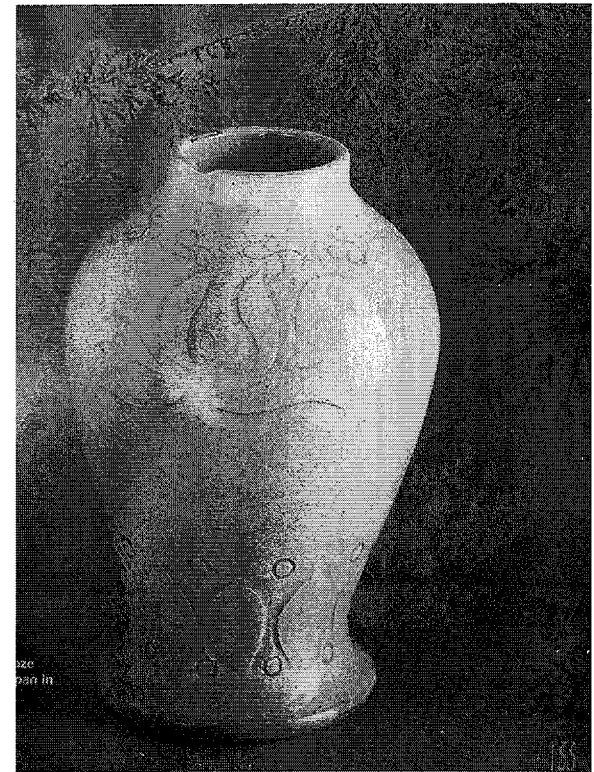


Figure 5.7 Sardar Gurcharan Singh, *A Piece with lotus motif*, Blue Pottery Trust, Delhi.

Notes

- 1 Rabindranath Tagore, 'On Oriental Culture and Japan's Mission' (address to the members of the Indo-Japanese Association, Tokyo, 15 May 1929), in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol. 3, p. 605.
- 2 Okakura Kakuzō, *The Book of Tea*, p. 4.
- 3 For more details see, Shigemi Inaga, 'Okakura Kakuzō and India: The Trajectory of Modern National Consciousness and Pan-Asian Ideology Across Borders', pp. 39–57.
- 4 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (A.K.C.), *The Aims of Indian Art*, 1908.
- 5 Okakura Kakuzō, *The Ideals of the East*, p. 12.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 7 Shigemi Inaga, 'Okakura Kakuzō's Nostalgic Journey to India and the Invention of Asia,' pp. 119–132.
- 8 Sister Nivedita, of Ramakrishna-Vivekānanda, 'Introduction', in *The Ideals of the East*, p. 6. As for the exchange of ideas between Nivedita and Okakura, see Shigemi Inaga, 'Sister Nivedita and her *Kali the Mother, the Web of Indian Life*, and Art Criticism: New Insights into Okakura Kakuzō's Indian Writings and the Function of Art in the Shaping of Nationality,' pp. 129–159.
- 9 On this process in the 1930s and 1940s, see Noriko Murai, 'A Writer Born through Translation: The Invention and Reception of 'Okakura Tenshin',' pp. 164–186.
- 10 A.K.C., *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, p. 18.
- 11 A.K.C., 'Intellectual Fraternity' (1916), in *The Dance of Siva: Essays on Indian Art and Culture*, p. 114.
- 12 A.K.C., *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, p. 256.
- 13 *The Modern Review*, Dec. 1909; 'Mediaeval Sinhalese Art', in *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, Vol. 3, p. 52.
- 14 A.K.C., 'Buddhist Primitive,' *The Dance of Siva*, p. 54.
- 15 Sister Nivedita & A.K.C., 'Preface,' in *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists*, pp. v–vii.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. v–vi.
- 17 See, for example, 'Art Appreciation' (1906), *The Complete Works of Sister Nivedita*, Vol. 3, p. 58.
- 18 Tapatī Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art, Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850–1920*, p. 182.
- 19 Kūmaarswami, *Indo Bijutsu-shi*, Sobu Rokurō, Iwasaki Masumi (translation), pp. 4–5. The original passage:

The Hindus have never believed in art for art's sake; their art, like that of mediaeval Europe, was an art for love's sake. They made no distinctions of sacred and profane. I am glad to think that they have never consciously sought for beauty; just none of their social institutions were intended to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number. For great art results from the impulse to express certain clear intuitions of life and death, rather than from the conscious wish to make beautiful picture or songs.
 (A.K.C., 'Preface' in *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon*, London: T.N Foulis, 1913, n.p.)
- 20 Taki Seiichi, 'Gandara Geijutsu no hihiyō nitsuite,' (Concerning Criticism of Gandharan Art,' (Journal of Calligraphy, Painting and antiques), pp. 1–8.
- 21 Shigemi Inaga, 'Okakura Kakuzō and India: The Trajectory of Modern National Consciousness and Pan-Asian Ideology across Borders,' pp. 48–49.
- 22 Vincent Smith, *A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon*, pp. 129–130. The corresponding part is in Okakura, *The Ideals of the East*, p. 78, 92. Taki Seiichi, 'Gandara...', Nr. 103, 1917, pp. 1–6.
- 23 On this expedition, see Shigemi Inaga, 'The Interaction of Bengali and Japanese Artistic Milieus in the First Half of the Twentieth Century (1901–1945)', pp. 149–181.
- 24 Taki Seiichi, 'On the Necessity of Studying Indian Art,' pp. 14–18.
- 25 Fujihara Sadao, 'Children of Tenshin; How the Japanese Art History Was Inherited as a Thought?' in *Bondage in Scholarship*, pp. 53–70.
- 26 A.K.C., 'The Theory of Art in Asia' (Chapter 1), in *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, p. 186, n. 20. In 'That Beauty Is a State,' A.K.C. refers to *Kokka* (no. 244), quoting from Kuo Jo Hsū: 'The Secret of Art Lies in the Artist Himself' (*The Dance of Siva*, p. 41).
- 27 Jan. 25, 1911, letter No. 169, in *Complete Work of Okakura Tenshin*, Hiebonsha, Vol. 7.
- 28 Yanagi Muneyoshi, *Complete Work*, Chikuma Shobō, 1989, Vol. 21-1, pp. 638–604.
- 29 For a comparison of A.K.C.'s and Yanagi's understanding of museums, see Kuji Tatsuya, 'Museums as Were Conceived by Anti-modern Thinkers; in Reference to A.K. Coomaraswamy and Yanagi Muneyoshi,' pp. 235–249.
- 30 On A.K.C.'s studies of religion conducted in Japan, see Minoru Kasai, 'A. K. Coomaraswamy's Comparative Studies of the Thought East and West, and His Critical Consciousness,' in *Hikaku Shisō Kenkyū*, Comparative Studies of Thinking, Vol. 10, 1983, pp. 81–189; 'Time and Eternity: A. K. Coomaraswamy's Comparative Religious Studies,' Vol. 11, 1984, pp. 142–149; 'Hinduism and Buddhism: A.K. C.'s Comparative Religious Studies', Vol. 12, 1985, pp. 143–146. Though many points suggest A.K.C.'s affinity with Yanagi's religious thought, the author, Kasai, does not mention the latter. Tamaki Watanabe, 'Hermeneutics of A.K.C.', pp. 249–251 compares A.K.C. with René Guénon when referring to M. Eliade.
- 31 Mizuo Hiroshi, *Yanagi Muneyoshi, a Biography*, 1992; Chikuma Gakugei Bunko, 2004, pp. 123–138; pp. 143–144. See also Shigemi Inaga, 'Reconsidering the Mingei Undō as a Colonial Discourse: The Politics of Visualizing Asian "Folk Craft"', pp. 219–230; and Yuko Kikuchi, *Japanese Modernisation and Mingei Theory: Cultural Nationalism and Oriental Orientalism*, pp. 123–143.
- 32 Guha-Thakurta, op.cit., p. 182.
- 33 Cited in Mizuo, op.cit., p. 128.
- 34 A.K.C., 'Young India', in *The Dance of Siva*, p. 135.
- 35 *Dhammapada*, quoted by A.K.C. in *The Dance of Siva*, p. 123.
- 36 A.K.C., 'Cosmopolitan View of Nietzsche,' *The Dance of Siva*, p. 118.
- 37 A.K.C., 'Young India,' *The Dance of Siva*, p. 123.
- 38 Yanagi, 'My Thought on Choson People' (1920); quoted in Mizuo, p. 126.
- 39 A.K.C., 'What Has India Contributed to Human Welfare?', *Athenaeum*, 1915; *The Dance of Siva*, p. 16.
- 40 A.K.C., 'Young India,' *The Dance of Siva*, p. 127.
- 41 An English translation 'Japan's Mistaken Policy and Korea's Fate' was published in *The Japan Advertiser*, Tokyo, Wed. 13 August 1919. Here I have included a translation from the Japanese original.
- 42 *Yanagi Sōetsu zenshū* (Complete Work of Y.S.), vol. VI, p. 29.
- 43 A.K.C., 'Status of Indian Women,' *The Dance of Siva*, p. 101.
- 44 It is more than ironic that Yanagi's attitude towards the Korean arts and crafts is quite similar to that of Sir George Birdwood. See Yoritatsu Hashimoto, 'George Birdwood on Indian Arts and Crafts', pp. 73–77. Also, Miwa Kanaya, 'The Birth of Folk-Craft—A Comparison of Muneyoshi Yanagi with A.K.C.,' in *Yanagi Muneyoshi and the Mingei Folk Craft Movement*, pp. 140–163.
- 45 A.K.C. 'Young India,' *The Dance of Siva*, p. 125.
- 46 A.K.C. 'Hindu View of Art: Historical,' *The Dance of Siva*, p. 26.
- 47 Yanagi, 'The Way of Craftsmanship' (1927), in *The Unknown Craftsman*, p. 208.

- 48 Yanagi, *The Way of Craft* (Kōgei no Michi), 1928.
- 49 Yanagi, *The Way of Craft* (Kōgei no Michi), 1928; here the text is based on the summary by Mizuo, op.cit., pp. 201–212.
- 50 Mizuo, op.cit., p. 217.
- 51 All the quotations in the next two paragraphs are from A.K.C., ‘Cosmopolitan View of Nietzsche’ (1918), in *The Dance of Siva*, pp. 117–119.
- 52 Yanagi Muneyoshi, ‘Unknown Craftsman’ (1927), in *The Unknown Craftsman*, pp. 21–215.
- 53 A.K.C., ‘Cosmopolitan View of Nietzsche,’ *The Dance of Siva*, p. 120.
- 54 A.K.C., ‘Status of Indian Woman,’ *The Dance of Siva*, p. 86.
- 55 A.K.C., ‘Sahaja,’ *The Dance of Siva*, p. 109.
- 56 A.K.C., ‘The Dance of Siva,’ *The Dance of Siva*, p. 61. In his ‘Mediaeval Sinhalese Art,’ A.K.C. quotes another pottery proverb: ‘As all earthen vessels made by the potter break at last, so is the life of men’ (*The Dance of Siva*, p. 268).
- 57 Okakura Kakuzō, *The Book of Tea* (1906), p. 24.
- 58 A.K.C., ‘Young India,’ *The Dance of Siva*, p. 135.
- 59 I owe the following information to Yorimitsu Hashimoto, ‘Gurcharan Singh, Indian Potter, His Encounter with Yanagi Muneyoshi and His Trip to Korea,’ in *Mingei*, from No 247 to No 250, March to June, 2015. See also Gurcharan Singh, *Pottery in India* and Anupa Lal, ed., *Pottery and the Legacy of Sardar Gurcharan Singh*.
- 60 Yanagi, C. W., Vol.21-1, p. 639.
- 61 James Henry Cousins, ‘Realization, Tides,’ *Japan Advertiser*, 22 June 1919.
- 62 A.K.C., ‘The Dance of Siva,’ *The Dance of Siva*, p. 61.
- 63 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 64 Okamoto Kan’ei, *Indian Art, Its Dominant and Its Expression*, p. 182.
- 65 From the *Bhāgavad Gītā*, quoted in Okamoto, p. 138; Cf. Sister Nivedita & A.K.C., *Myths of the Hindus & Buddhists*, p. 189. The translation of the latter stops shortly before the passage in question.
- 66 A.K.C., ‘The Dance of Siva,’ pp. 65–66.
- 67 Okamoto, *ibid.*, p. 163.
- 68 *Ibid.*, p. 184.
- 69 A.K.C., ‘The Dance of Siva,’ p. 63; Okamoto, op. cit., p. 187.
- 70 Muneyoshi Yanagi, ‘Hakeme’ (1954), in *The Unknown Craftsman*, p. 173.

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Culture as Power

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Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	vii
<i>List of contributors</i>	xi
<i>Foreword</i>	xv

BY SHYAM SARAN

<i>Preface</i>	xvii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xxiii

Introduction: the discovery of Buddhist dialogues between India and Japan—history, culture and the state	1
MADHU BHALLA	

PART I	
The Indo-Japanese dialogue	23
1 Buddhism as the pinnacle of Ancient Indian morality: Tagore and Vivekananda interpreting the figure of Buddha	25
VICTOR A. VAN BIJLERT	
2 Kakuzō Okakura in cultural exchange between India and Japan: dialogue with Swami Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore	49
EMIKO SHIMIZU	
3 Japan in India's Xenology: negotiating modernity, culture and cosmopolitanism in colonial Bengal	69
AMIYA P. SEN	
4 India-Japan dialogue in the 1920s: Buddhism and world peace in <i>The Young East</i>	85
JUDITH SNODGRASS	

5	A.K. Coomaraswamy and Japan: a tentative overview	109
	SHIGEMI INAGA	

PART II

	World Heritage and a new world order	133
--	--------------------------------------	-----

6	Cultural heritage: from nationalism to internationalism	135
	HIMANSHU PRABHA RAY	

7	Globalisation and the formation of East Asian art collections: the Freer Art Gallery	159
	MITSUTERU NARAYAMA	

8	Survey trips to China by Meiji era Japanese art historians and the development of Buddhist Art History in Japan – through the example of the Shaka triad image in Horyuji	170
	SUIJUN RA	

9	Japanese encounters with Ajanta	189
	YASUKO FUKUYAMA	

	<i>Glossary</i>	209
--	-----------------	-----

	<i>Index</i>	211
--	--------------	-----