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Stella Kramrisch and Ananda Coomaraswamy

by Pratapaditya Pal

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This article is a slightly revised excerpt from Chapter 2 of *In Pursuit of the Past, Collecting Old Art in Modern India*, 2015 (Mumbai: Marg) and highlights the scholarship and collecting of Stella Kramrisch (1896-1993), renowned for her scholarship, exhibitions and collecting, in comparison with the legendary curator and polymath Ananda K Coomaraswamy (1877-1947).

Stella Kramrisch (1896-1993)

In 1921, four years after Ananda Coomaraswamy (Fig. 1) settled in Boston, Stella Kramrisch arrived in India. While brought up in Britain, Coomaraswamy had the advantage of his cultural heritage when he moved to Sri Lanka first and then to India with nationalist zeal for the country and the civilization. Both physically and mentally - given his gender and name, his aristocratic origin, his adoption of Indian attire and his fluency with the English language and the British accent—he assimilated easily in Indian society. In an etching by Nandalal Bose (Pal 2015 p. 23, figure 1.3), as he sits in an easy chair with the Tagore brothers smoking the hookah, he seems to the manor born.[1]



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

By contrast, the diminutive, slim, shy, 25-year-old woman from Vienna—with a German accent and a soft voice—must have been quite awkward and uneasy on her arrival in India.[2] (Fig. 2)

Moreover, she was transplanted not to a metropolitan and cosmopolitan city like Bombay or Calcutta with urbane and sophisticated society and atmosphere, but to Santi Niketan in rural Bengal. The only person she knew was the poet whom she had briefly met in England and who was a larger-than-life celebrity. Although Tagore may have been a globetrotter and symbolized East-West harmony in his own personality, the university community in Santi Niketan was definitely not as expansive in its outlook. Rather, despite its reputation as a liberal institution in the greater Bengali society because of its system of co-education, it was in reality very conservative. Most of Kramrisch's colleagues were male and the few Europeans who came from time to time to teach rarely stayed more than a year and travelled a great deal around the land. The physical amenities were also minimal and inadequate.

In this milieu, both because of her gender and her European (memsahib) origin, Stella's situation must have been somewhat uncomfortable, physically and emotionally. Despite her closeness to Tagore (it is said that he was the only one before whom she pirouetted, with the doors shut and windows curtained), he had a university to run and numerous visitors to attend to. Kramrisch did not yet speak fluent English and could not have been vivacious company; the living quarters were primitive and the food strange, privacy unknown and the local language incomprehensible. It is surprising that she lasted as long as she did in the so-called idyllic experimental center of learning. By 1923 she had persuaded the ageing poet who had great sympathy for pretty, young and talented women, to find her a job at the Calcutta University. Tagore sent a request to Sir Asutosh Mookerjee, the Vice-Chancellor of the University, who attended a talk given by Kramrisch in Calcutta and offered her a post. So, she moved to the big city.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Unlike Coomaraswamy whose visits to India were sporadic (fewer after his move to Boston in 1917), Kramrisch made Calcutta her home for almost three decades until she too followed in his footsteps to the United States. But while Coomaraswamy had an affinity with Indian culture, Kramrisch never fully acclimatized. However, beginning with that first visit to the Poush Mela the day after her arrival in Santi Niketan, she instantly fell in love with Indian arts and crafts to which she remained passionately attached for the rest of her life, though culturally she was a steadfast European. Wearing a sari, she did manage to enter the Puri temple (forbidden to non-Hindus) to see Jagannath—using the pallu to cover her face completely as many orthodox Indian women did at the time - and she got away with it. She is also said to have been initiated by a Tantric guru, but on my visits with her in Philadelphia I saw no physical evidence of her devotion to Hinduism. She had no shrine or puja room; I never heard her listen to Indian music and I don't believe she cared much for Indian cuisine. She never wore a sari in America or in India (except perhaps to enter temples surreptitiously) though she adored

Indian textiles, which she collected as well as cut up to tailor into her European costume (figures 3 and 4). In other words, while there was no gap in her admiration for Indian visual arts of all kinds, she was neither pretentious nor a genuine convert to Indian culture as many Westerners become. Her home and apartments, whether in Calcutta or in Philadelphia, the two cities where she lived most of her long life, were always quintessentially European in taste with no smells of spices or burning incense, nor did one hear the sounds of the sitar in the background. I have met her in India, Nepal and USA and travelled with her in Germany once for a week, and never doubted her Europeaness.

While Coomaraswamy formed his core collection in a little over a decade and sold it to Boston in 1917, and his early collection forays across the subcontinent were known publicly and commented upon in the Calcutta circle, Kramrisch steadily acquired for three decades in India but in a more discreet manner. For example, O.C. Ganguly writes about most of his contemporary collectors but says little about Kramrisch's collection. She herself has left few documents about her collecting adventures and experiences, which makes it very difficult to explain her sources (except for the Bharanys) or to understand her modus operandus in assembling so formidable a collection as she did even by the time she left India. Her salary at the Calcutta University was meagre and so one must assume she had some money of her own.[3] What we know is that before WWII she had sent out a large portion of her collection to England and loaned pieces of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London,[4] and that from the late '30s she spent the summers teaching at the London Warburg Institute. The V&A loans were sent directly to Philadelphia and when she moved from India to the United States permanently in 1952-53, when she was allowed to take her Indian possessions with her.[5]



Fig. 5

Kramrisch and Coomaraswamy

Although they were two very different personalities, Kramrisch and Coomaraswamy had much in common as far as the visual arts were concerned. Apart from their love for classical Indian art, they were both equally interested in the contemporary arts and crafts including textiles. Both were scholars and aesthetes but also interested in mysticism and philosophy. Coomaraswamy was the better linguist with a wider knowledge of Sanskrit and Pali literature, but both were deeply engaged in plumbing the intellectual and spiritual significance of the creative process as understood by ancient Indian theologians and theorists. Although Kramrisch rarely mentioned Coomaraswamy by name in her writings – and as far as I know, they never met – there is no doubt she had avidly read many of his art-historical publications by the time she arrived on the scene and even characterized him as her guru. Kramrisch's perception of Indian paintings, for instance, must have owed much to the pioneering works of Coomaraswamy, largely based on material he himself had discovered and collected.

Coomaraswamy had already revolutionized the study of Buddhist art by his 1908 article "The Influence of Greek on Indian Art" (that he would later expound on in his famous 1927 essay on the origin of the Buddha image) while Stella was busy studying the monuments of Bharhut and Sanchi as a doctorate student in Vienna. By 1930 Coomaraswamy had published four volumes of the catalogue of the MFA Indian collections, the catalogue of the Goloubew Collection of mostly Islamic and Mughal pictures, and a sweeping history of the arts of India and Indonesia that also included Ceylon, Cambodia and Thailand. Kramrisch's first overview of the history of Indian sculpture in English did not appear until 1933 but it remained an influential work for her students in Calcutta University, such as Niharranjan Ray and Sarasikumar Saraswati, both of whom were my teachers.[6] The work was compulsory reading for us in the 1950s, and Kramrisch was already a mythic figure at the Calcutta University though she had left only three years before I joined.

It is curious that Kramrisch evinced little interest in the Islamic arts of West and Central Asia or in the arts of Southeast Asia.[7] On the other hand, she avidly collected and wrote about the folk and tribal arts of India, particularly of the eastern region, unlike Coomaraswamy. Her scholarly contributions to the study of Indian textiles, especially the type known as *kantha* (the embroidered quilt of Bengal), as well as her interpretation of the spiritual and symbolic significance of the Hindu temple, were of seminal importance in the history of Indian art.

Indian Society of Oriental Art

Her passion for textiles in general and kanthas in particular must have been engendered by exposure to a Bengali folk festival immediately upon her arrival in Santiniketan in 1921 and her association with the Tagore family. As has been pointed out in chapter 1, Abanindranath was a connoisseur and collector of kanthas and must have shown her his collection. Moreover, the greatest collector of Bengali folk art at the time was Gurusaday Dutt (1882-1941), who will be discussed in the next chapter. He was an ICS officer and an active member of the ISOA with which Kramrisch too became closely associated after moving to Calcutta from Santiniketan. She in turn instilled an interest in kanthas in at least two of her students, Debaprasad Ghosh and Kalyan Kumar Ganguly (no relation of O. C.). The former collected folk arts including kanthas for the Ashutosh Museum of which he was a founding curator (also to be discussed in the next chapter), and Ganguly's dissertation subject was on those humble quilts, mostly the creative efforts of Bengali village women. Kramrisch's extensive collection of kanthas is now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art and was displayed a few years ago in a groundbreaking exhibition.[8] She seems to have concentrated mostly on the kanthas of Faridpur and Jessore districts of Bengal (figure 5). What is interesting is that she used some of the kanthas as bedspreads while we, as children, bundled up with them in the mild Bengal winters. Kramrisch's recycling of kanthas and other textiles for personal wear would have pleased Coomaraswamy who always insisted on the equivalence of beauty and utility.



Fig. 6

Where Coomaraswamy and Kramrisch differed significantly is that while by 1930 Coomaraswamy had catalogued the permanent collection of the Boston Museum and concentrated on scholarship rather than exhibitions, Kramrisch was more passionate about assembling major exhibitions with catalogues on broad themes of Indian art. If Coomaraswamy was among the pioneers in collecting and curating Indian art, then Kramrisch was unquestionably the premier exhibitionist.



Fig. 7

Two exhibitions that Kramrisch organized while curator at Philadelphia were also based partly on her own collections, now at Philadelphia. One was the pioneering *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (1968), which is yet to be surpassed; the other was *Painted Delight* (1986), a rich exhibition of Rajput paintings, many from her own collection. Both exhibitions attest to her aesthetic sensibility for “fine” art as well as her empathy for humble everyday objects whose artistic value she was the first major art scholar to discern. Conspicuous by their absence among her personal collections are Mughal pictures and, as was the case with Coomaraswamy, Chola bronzes, perhaps not by choice but due to financial limitations.

Although Coomaraswamy acquired the arts of the Himalayan nations of Nepal and Tibet, and a bronze bodhisattva of Newar workmanship in Boston became one of the most well-known metal sculptures of the tradition since its first publication in the 1920s, it was Kramrisch who was the more avid and discerning collector of the arts of these two Himalayan cultures.[9] In fact, unhesitatingly it should be admitted that no individual scholar with the exception of Giuseppe Tucci had assembled so varied and important a collection of the arts of Nepal and Tibet anywhere with such discrimination and perspicacity as Kramrisch. She displayed her scholarly interest in the distinctive portable paintings of Nepal by publishing a major article as early as 1933, and in 1964 curated the pioneering exhibition of the arts of Nepal for the Asia Society in New York in which a number of her own objects were included. She moreover acquired an excellent group of Tibetan thangkas for the museum as well as for herself. Two of the Himalayan masterpieces – one each from Nepal and Tibet – are reproduced here as token examples of her knowledge and exquisite taste.



Fig. 8

The Nepali sculpture is a masterpiece of the Newar artist’s skill in modelling and casting in metal for which the community has been justly famous in Asia since ancient times (figure 6). The deity represented is Indra, king of the gods, who has inspired the Newar sculptors to invent a unique type of figural form. However, this figure differs significantly from the more conventional images in several ways – in its posture, gesture and the shape of the crown – denoting the individuality of the unknown artist and Kramrisch’s discerning eye. The Tibetan thangka is one of a set of five Sambhogakaya (Body of Bliss) Buddhas, of which two others are in Los Angeles and Boston (figure 7). All three were once in the possession of Chunilal Nowlakha of Calcutta and are now regarded as early examples of Newar-inspired Tibetan painting in the Beri style.

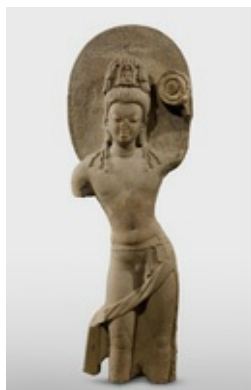


Fig. 9

From her extensive Indian collection, I have selected only one object, as it is a real tour de force and also one of my favourites. It is a stone sculpture of the Sarnath School and of the Gupta period (figure 8). I remember my first encounter with it in her house in the suburbs of Philadelphia back in 1964 when I was bowled over by its serene elegance. Much later when I did my exhibition of Gupta art for the Asia Society in 1978, she refused to lend it. Now, of course, it has pride of place in the Philadelphia Museum and may well be the finest piece of Gupta-period stone sculpture in an American collection.

As is the case with Coomaraswamy, so also with Kramrisch, very little is known about the precise sources of her collections. We do know however that she acquired from both Radhakishen Bharany and his son Chhotelal. The latter has in his possession a letter of recommendation written by Kramrisch to his father. The son was a student of Kramrisch for a

year at the Calcutta University and speaks and writes with great emotion about her as follows:

Among the scholar-collectors the person I revere most, after my father, is Stella Kramrisch. I consider Stellaji to be my guru. I first met her when she came to Amritsar with Alice Boner in 1940, but she was already a customer of my father’s ...

Whatever little I am today in the art world I owe to her because but for her I would not have gone to Calcutta but stayed back in Punjab ...

They say the best things come in small packages. Stella was a very tiny lady, small in height but very high in her love for art. She was more Indian than any Indian. She understood “Hinduism” more than many Hindus. Stella responded to paintings emotionally and she saw the real spirit in Indian art like the other giants. Coomaraswamy, Rai Saheb and Dr. Randhawa ... [10]

Interestingly, Bharany characterizes her “Indianness” in much the same way as M.P. Pandit spoke about Sir John Woodroffe’s Indian soul, alluded to in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter—“Indian souls in European bodies.” I would now add “American as well.” Continuing his rapturous eulogy of Kramrisch, Bharany comments (though in somewhat contradictory fashion) about her Indian sensitivity:

Once on a visit to Amritsar, Stella went to pay homage at the Golden Temple. When she came out of the temple, she opened up her purse and started putting on her lipstick. She was a foreigner, attired in a skirt and so thought nothing of wearing her make-up in public. This was new for the Amritsar crowd, who gathered around to watch her. She was oblivious to the crowd and unruffled. This was her natural manner...

While she was in India Stella did not have much money but she had a very good eye and was crazy about Indian art. She was a lady of austerity. In her madness or love for art and acquiring it she would happily miss a meal or two. For a thing of Rs. 200-300, which today may not sound a very big amount, she would pay in instalments. This was her true passion...

She continued the same life of a hermit in Philadelphia, where her home was on the outskirts of the city ... During our last meeting she gave me two of her blouses that she had stitched using exquisite woven borders of Dhaka saris but which by that time she was no longer using.

Although not as intimate a gift as a piece of personal apparel, Kramrisch had also given an object from her collections to Rothenstein in 1935. In a letter to Rabindranath dated June 5, he waxes eloquent about this fragment of sculpture as follows:

... and lately Stella Kramrisch has sent me out of generosity of her soul, a carved apsaras, in which I can delight daily in one of the great inventions of the art world. What power, what subtlety, what right beauty of form lies in this fragment! [11]

Just as Bharany was an acolyte of Kramrisch, so was young Nasli Heeramaneck of Coomaraswamy. Nasli migrated to America in 1927 to become a pioneering purveyor/collector of Asian art and interacted with Coomaraswamy at the MFA. Indeed, when I met Nasli for the first time in New York in the summer of 1964, he spoke with great

fervour about his closeness to Coomaraswamy and how the savant had been his mentor, but rarely about Kramrisch. Apparently whenever he acquired an important object, if it was portable, he took the train to Boston to show it to the master and get his opinion. He could not have got a better teacher with no fees to pay and no classes to attend.

As far as I know there was no other Indian art dealer in the States for Coomaraswamy to interact with, but after 1950 Kramrisch had more choice. Kramrisch too sold from her collection and even I was able to acquire an object that belonged to her through Jaipaul, an Indian dealer in Philadelphia who was a regular conduit for her commercial activities. Others she dealt with included such well-known New York dealers as J. J. Klejman, William Wolff and Doris Wiener. However, Kramrisch and Nasli appear not to have had much to do with each other commercially though, of course, they knew one another.

As Bharany has recalled, Kramrisch was adept at cajoling dealers and friends in India to accept her terms while adding to or selling pieces from her collection – as I have also discussed elsewhere and was told by others in Calcutta, such as the late Chunalil Nowlakh, a well-known dealer, and some teachers who knew her. The salary of a professor in Calcutta, or, for that matter a curator in an American museum, was not exactly generous and so it was almost an economic necessity to have alternative sources of income. Besides, collectors always need to sell in order to upgrade. I gather Queen Mary, the wife of King George V, was equally “persuasive” with collectors/dealers in forming her own collection.

While Ananda Coomaraswamy came to Boston as curator of his own collection, Stella Kramrisch, I believe, had an arrangement with the Philadelphia Museum that in exchange for a lifetime appointment she would bequeath her collection to the institution. In the event she had a long life but it was a win-win situation for both parties. In Philadelphia she continued to collect, mostly for the museum. Her bequest to the Philadelphia Museum remains one of the most generous to an American museum by an academician.

Both Coomaraswamy and Kramrisch are familiar names to later generations as renowned scholars. Less well known are their passions for collecting, in which too they had few peers. Coomaraswamy was able to publish most of his collection, either under his own name or as “Ross-Coomaraswamy” collection, in his numerous books and catalogues. Kramrisch, however, was more reticent to reveal her identity as a collector, though she did include some of her objects in various exhibition catalogues after moving to Philadelphia in the 1960s. They were always done so anonymously. Therefore, the collection remains relatively unknown except for the kanthas in Darielle Mason 2009. Even as this reprint goes to press in 2024, the Kramrisch collection unfortunately remains unpublished. If a publication is not possible, it is my hope that it will be available in its entirety on the internet in due course.

Endnotes

1. See <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/22377/the-studio-of-abanindranath-tagore-depicted-around-19091910?> Published Pal 2015 p. 23, figure 1.3

2. According to her she was invited by Rabindranath Tagore when they met in Oxford or London to come and teach at Visvabharati. She had a Ph.D. in art history but was also an accomplished Ballet dancer. She went to Oxford to hear Tagore’s lecture and met him.

3. She saved her appointment letter as the University Professor in the 1940s when her monthly salary was 350 rupees.

4. Apparently a paper was read by Dr. Darielle Mason, the Stella Kramrisch Professor of Indian Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, at a symposium on Kramrisch in December 2013 in London, but despite my request I was not given the opportunity to read this presentation.

5. Her friendship with Indira Gandhi helped, as I was told, for she was given final dispensation by the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (Indira’s father) to export her entire collection as her personal possession.

6. Professor Saraswati was a better informant than Dr. Ray who, though very close to Kramrisch during most of her time in Calcutta, had some disagreement with her towards the end, as is clear from a letter from Dr. Ray preserved in the Kramrisch archives. Unlike Coomaraswamy, Kramrisch published very little about the arts of the Islamic world in West Asia or for that matter of Southeast Asia.

7. I have been able to trace at least one long and polemical review by her of Karl With’s book on the art and architecture of Java. See *Rupam*, no 12 (October 1922), pp. 138-42. This was an early piece of writing, which she must have done soon after joining Santiniketan.

8. Mason 2009. For a detailed description of the kantha in figure 4, see pl. 25, p. 208.

9. In fact, our first meeting in Calcutta 1959 was due to our mutual interest in the art of Nepal.

10. Bharany 2014, pp. 50-51 for this and the following quote; see also fig. 16 for the blouse she gave him.

11. Lago 1972.

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Addenda & Acknowledgements (2024)

I would like to add a brief bibliographical note regarding Coomaraswamy and Kramrisch for those who wish to learn more about the two collectors. The biographical literature for Coomaraswamy is vast. The most up to date bibliography about Coomaraswamy is that by Crouch 2002. This may be augmented by Pal 2020. For Kramrisch see Kramrisch and Miller 1983 and Pal 2011.

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