



# Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History Part III, March 25 - 26, 2011 Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

*The Art Historian as Ethnographer: Ananda Coomaraswamy's Photographic Archives*

**Anne McCauley, Princeton University**

The difficulty of reading the extant photographic archive of any individual or institution as an intentional and consistent creation is readily apparent in the case of Ananda Coomaraswamy. A self-taught art historian with a Ph.D. in geology, Coomaraswamy has been celebrated for his contributions to the study of Indian art and civilization in the United States and his career as the first curator (and source) of the collection in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. His use of photography originated with the remarkable photographs taken by his wife, Ethel, between 1903-06 that were used to illustrate his first book, *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (1908), which undoubtedly sensitized him to the demands of printing, cropping, and masking. Like most art historians, he continued to amass commercial photographs of Indian sculpture, wall painting, and architecture, but also took up the medium himself after his divorce from Ethel in 1910, which allowed him to make copies of the prints he purchased as well as shoot his own images during subsequent travels to Asia.

After characterizing the ways that Coomaraswamy's publications were indebted to his photographic archive, this talk will focus more specifically on the presence of ethnographic photographs of Indian craftsmen (taken by Ethel) and the large number of images of dancers, musicians and entertainers that distinguish the archive from those of other art historians in the early twentieth century. Coomaraswamy's belief in the racial continuities between contemporary folk practices and traditional Indian sculpture and his ideas about the sources of sculptural poses in dance informed his collection as well as his field research. Parallel to but quite different from Aby Warburg's *Bilderatlas* and concept of *Pathosformel*, Coomaraswamy's use of popular photographs ranging from tourist postcards to dance programs become the visible equivalents of his early political support for Indian nationalism and Guild Socialism.

## *Biographical Note*

Anne McCauley is the David H. McAlpin Professor of the History of Photography and Modern Art at Princeton University and the author of numerous books and articles on 19th and 20th-century

photography, most recently “Francis Bruguiere and Lance Sieveking’s *Beyond This Point (1929): An Experiment in Abstract Photography, Synaesthesia, and the Cinematic Book*,” in Joel Smith, ed., *More Than One: Photographs in Sequence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 46-65. She has done extensive research on the impact of photography on art history, and co-authored the catalogue, *The Museum and the Photograph* (with Mark Haworth-Booth, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1998).