

Whispers of History: Exploring Ajanta's Mural Treasures

Abstract

The murals and sculptures at the Ajanta caves are considered to be influenced by Gupta art. Although the Gupta Dynasty did not rule over the Deccan, where the caves are situated, they were related by marriage with some Vakataka rulers. The patrons of the caves may also have taken advantage of the migration of artists due to the decline of the Guptas in the fifth century. The paintings and sculptures in the caves feature many of the characteristics and influences of Gupta art, particularly the manner of representing the Buddha in a meditative state. However, they also display artistic influences from the surrounding Deccan region. The art of the caves also show precision and balance in composition, as well as a highly refined mode of depicting human and divine figures.

Keywords: Cave Art, Mural art, Culture, The Buddhist Tradition and Philosophical Traditions.

Introduction

The Buddhist tradition, like other philosophical traditions comprehends time-kala in past अतीत, present -pachupanno and future anagata but unlike the other traditions the Buddhist tradition as per Mahaniddeśa does not consider the otita and anagata as realities. Nagarjuna too, after a long argument refuses to accept the time as an absolute entity and identifies it as a phenomenon in flux. Atita is already lost and the anagata is yet to come. That is why, according to Buddhist belief, pachupanna is the only reality. It exists but in flux, described as santati continuity. It's chittakhana a momentary or a dynamic reality. The three moments are connected with each other not necessarily in an unidirectional way as the chitta-mind has an ability to intuitively travel freely in past and present like a time machine. The cognition of time thus, is not sequential in this tradition. In Ajanta painting the bhinnakalika elements or characters belonging to different time sequences are seen in a single frame due to this understanding.

Objective of the Study

The murals are believed to have been made mostly by families that functioned as individual guilds engaged in painting. It is possible that, in some cases, the monks who resided in the monastery of the Ajanta caves supervised the production of the murals.

The visual style of the murals is highly sophisticated. Outlines are bold and elegant; compositions are full of activity and detail; and human figures are stylised, often ornately decorated with clothing or jewellery, sensitively shaded and provided with emotive facial expressions. The Ajanta artists' style of depicting elongated eyes and dynamic hand gestures is considered to be highly influential in the history of world art: it has been linked to mural paintings in Central Asia and manuscript paintings in China and Japan.

The Ajanta murals frequently depict scenes from daily life. Women are usually portrayed in traditional roles, such as those of a mother or wife. They are depicted with shapely bodies, generally in the *tribhanga* posture, wherein the body is composed around three main axes. In contrast, men are generally portrayed as saintly or ascetic.

Review of Literature

Ajanta is the sole monumental record of classical Buddhist culture that is preserved in a land that gave birth to this religion, and also influenced the culture of other Asian countries. The thirty odd caves cut into horse shaped scrap of a steep cliff overlooking the Waghura river are the best creations of the time which inspired Buddhist in central Asia, China and south-east Asia. Ajanta painters were guided by a highly developed sense of blending of colors with a view to produce total impression with three dimensional effects giving true perspective to line and plane. Besides, the technique of giving three dimensional effects to the painting was first introduced in India in the cave paintings of Ajanta in 3-4 century A.D. Figure 1 shows some of the paintings of Ajanta showing three dimensional effects. This technique was later copied by the other artist in the Asian region.

Main Text

Ajanta Cave Wall Painting

The Ajanta caves date from the 2nd century B.C.E. to 650 C.E and were cut into the mountainside in two distinct phases. The oldest murals, although less well preserved, are some of the oldest Buddhist paintings in existence. The most exquisite and well preserved of the Ajanta murals date from much later, during the 5th century Gupta period. At this time, artistic traditions within the Indian Subcontinent were flourishing, with artistic representations and compositional elements that were elegant in form and conceptual

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idealism. In a style similar to that of much later European fresco painting, the Ajanta murals showcase incredible skill in the painting of facial expression, gesture and pose.

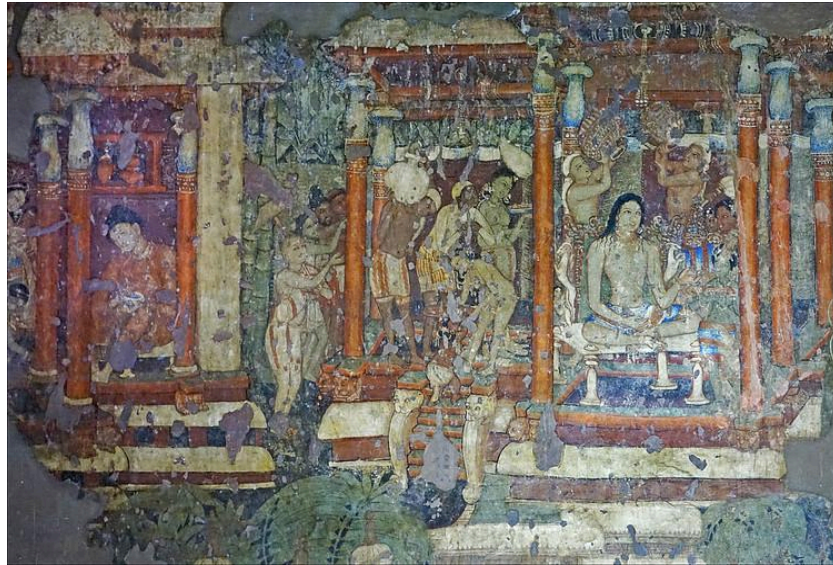


“Buddhist Pilgrims”

The murals From as early as 475 CE the caves were well known and frequently visited by travellers including Buddhist pilgrims, monks, and traders. The murals themselves are a rich source of knowledge of the cultural interactions taking place in the region at the time. Exemplifying the cosmopolitan nature of Buddhism during this period, it has been hypothesised that a number of people from other regions and cultures are depicted on the murals including figures believed to be Sassanian merchants, painted wearing vibrant blue socks and negotiating a transaction. Cave 1 contains a fresco with additional figures dressed in clothes from distant lands reflecting the prosperous and multicultural society of the 5th century CE that engaged readily in trade. It has been further suggested that lapis lazuli was specifically used to identify foreigners within the murals and used to paint their clothing. Further scenes in the murals appear to show a variety of colourful textiles which were a major import during the Gupta period. are painted in what would go on to become a style distinct to the Indian subcontinent but with some elements such as the use of perspective, lime mortar, and the three quarter profiles of the figures, suggesting a Hellenistic (Ancient Greek) influence. Notably, many of the colour pigments used in the painting, including red ochre, yellow ochre, brown ochre, black, white, and lapis lazuli were likely imported from Central Asia and the Iranian Plateau.



“Hellenistic Influence”



“Decorative elements including Mandalas, Monstrous creatures, Bodhisattvas and Buddhas”

Furthermore, the inheritors of the Ajanta pictorial tradition are varied and many of the painting's decorative elements, including mandalas, monstrous creatures, Bodhisattvas, and Buddhas have left an indelible imprint on artistic creations throughout the Silk Roads, and beyond. There are numerous examples in modern day Afghanistan, some of the most prominent being sites at Bamiyan, Foladi, and Kakrak. Other examples have been found throughout the Northern Indian Subcontinent and the Himalayas – primary points from which this art style later spread. A technique of portable paintings subsequently developed, popularised by the export of Buddhist texts throughout Asia which were essential in the spread of the associated artistic tradition and iconography. Additionally, the Ajanta tradition also fused with Chinese painting giving rise to a distinct new artistic style.

The narratives of Ajanta are conceived and born in these spaces and unfold in these times. No wonder that they are extremely complex and pose challenges to the onlooker. Reading Indian narratives is not simple like reading a comic strip but as the celebrated Aesthete Bernard Bosanquet has observed, the easy beauty offers short living pleasure. For a lifetime aesthetic experience one has to steer through the complex terrains. Ajanta is a demanding experience for the art lovers and extremely enlightening for the practicing artists. It is interesting to see how the Ajanta artists have manipulated the form and space relation to exploit the possibilities of narrative structures.

Conclusion

Ajanta has countless examples of this phenomenon; it is difficult to believe that the Ajanta painters who were so well equipped with the technicalities of painting, the study of human anatomy and fair knowledge of perspective did not have an understanding of linear narration. They ably divulge it often in many other paintings. If it is not employed in any of the paintings, there must be a reason behind it which perhaps can be traced from their comprehension of space and time and its exploitation. Kristina Kalisch, a Bavarian designer and a student of Buddhist philosophy quotes from a Sri Lankan source that the 'Space is a container that connects, enables and embraces. She states that "This idea of Buddhist philosophy makes me understand that there are so many other spaces that I create for the observer who enters into my rooms and into my designs. I create an emotional space. I create a space of feelings. I create a space for encounters. The Ajanta painters have precisely done the same. They have created time spans, spaces for their characters, their emotions, their ideas and most importantly the thought that the Tathagata was trying to impart through these stories.

Acknowledgement

I extend my deepest gratitude to the artists of the Ajanta mural paintings whose timeless creations have enriched our understanding of ancient Indian art and culture. Their mastery of technique and expression has captivated generations, and we are humbled by the beauty and complexity of their work. We also acknowledge the efforts of historians, conservators, and researchers who have tirelessly worked to preserve and study these invaluable treasures, ensuring their legacy endures for future generations to admire and learn from.

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