

II. The Art of Ajanta : Murals

The oldest and near contemporary text with Ajanta dealing with fine arts is the *Vishṇudharmottara* (circa sixth century A.D.). In the Chapter *Chitrasūtra* it mentions that painting is an art *par-excellence*: *kalānām pravaram chitraṁ dharma kāmārtha mokshadam* or *yathā janānām pravaraḥ kshītīsha-tathā kalānām-iah chitralalpah*.

The art of painting has a great antiquity in India. The paintings in the caverns of Hoshangabad, Pachmarhi and those recently discovered at Adamgarh near Bhopal and at Gupetsvar near Gwalior would suggest that this art was practised by the Middle Stone Age cave-dwellers. Throughout the centuries this art has been practised by the village potter to decorate the pots and pans and to relieve the drudgery of life. The *Vishṇudharmottara* (Chapter 35) notes a myth about the origin of *chitra*. It mentions that the sage Nārāyaṇa with the good of the people at his heart propounded the *chitra-sūtra*. He is said to have drawn the figure of a beautiful woman on the ground with mango juice. Out of this figure was created a beautiful *apsarā* by name Urvashī. The sage taught this art to Viśvakarmā, the divine architect. The significance of this myth lies in the fact that painting and perhaps sculpture were practised together by artists under the general supervision of the master-architect.

Before we go into the question of the art of Ajanta paintings it would be appropriate to understand the technique of Ajanta paintings. The Ajanta artists employed a very ingenious technique in preparing the 'ground' and in executing the paintings. The 'carrier' for the paintings was the compact volcanic rock with its many cavities. The surface of the rock was made uneven and rough so as to provide a firm grip to the covering plaster. The holes in the volcanic rock further acted as keys in keeping the plaster firmly fixed to the wall.

The 'ground' of the paintings was made of mud-plaster to which were added vegetable fibres, paddy husk, rock-grit and sand as reinforcing and binding material. The ground-coat of this plaster, which was laid on the rock, usually consisted of coarse material with fair amount of fibrous vegetable material, rock-grit and sand. Over this basal layer was added another layer of mud and ferruginous earth also mixed with rock-powder or sand and finer fibrous material. The surface was then treated with a thin layer of lime-wash over which pigments were applied. The plaster was reinforced, in a few cases, with cloth, stretched on the surface and paintings drawn thereon. This new feature has just recently come to our notice in one cave as a result of careful observation of a young scholar-cum photographer.

The pigments used by the Ajanta artists, with the exception of black, consisted of inorganic minerals such as red and yellow ochres, lapis lazuli for the blue and *terra verda* or glaucomite for the green. The black pigment was derived from lamp-black and the white from kaolin, lime or gypsum. The ochrous clays such as the red and yellow were procured from the clayey products of the weathering of the rock. The pigments were ground and mixed with water and applied on the surface. It has not been possible to prove the existence of the binding medium such as gum or glue. Perhaps animal glue was employed.

The *Vishṇuāharmottara* also mentions five primary colours: *mālarāṅgāḥ smṛitāḥ pañcha śvetāḥ pīto vilomataḥ kṛishṇo nīlaśca rājendra shataton-tarataḥ smṛitāḥ*. The *śveta* or white colour was *sudhā* or lime, *pīta* was *haritala* or yellow ochre, *nīla* was *rājavarta* or lapis. At another place, the text mentions *śveta*-white, *rakta*-red, *pīta*-yellow, *kṛishṇa*-black and *hārīta*-green as the primary colours.

We next deal with the various types of *vartanas* or the use of the brush for shading purposes. The *Vishṇudharmottara* mentions three types of shading: (1) *patravartana* with lines having the shape of *patra* or leaf, (2) *hairika vartana* or very minute (*sūkshma*), while the (3) *binduvartana* is formed by dots. The brushes used for the paintings were very carefully made out of a sweet smelling rod of *khachora* mixed with boiled rice rolled into a pointed stump. The *tūlikā* was a finer brush made out of a thin bamboo rod with a cotton swab or a small feather attached to it. A *lekhanī*, which is another name of *tūlikā*, was used for applying colours. It was made from soft hair from the ear of a calf and fixed with lac. It was either thick and broad or thin according as it was meant for different types of painting and shading. Sometimes hair from the squirrel's tail and the belly of the sheep was used for making the brushes.

Nowhere the names of the artist of Ajanta or anything about their life is mentioned. However, on the basis of the available historical data, it appears that they had their compact organization in the form of guilds consisting of different kinds of specialists relating to the art of painting. The guilds had also arrangements for training young students in the crafts.

The subject-matter of Ajanta paintings

The Buddhist monks following this age-old tradition thought of painting the stories from the life of Buddha on the walls of caves for the benefit of the visiting pilgrims. As already mentioned, the Jātaka stories were best suited for the propagation of the faith. The Ajanta artist, therefore, selected under the direction of the Master-priest a particular Jātaka, for example, the *Chhaddanta Jātaka* to demonstrate Bodhisattva's boundless generosity, the *Vessantara Jātaka* his charity, the *Vidhurapandita Jātaka* his wisdom. The object was to emphasise the importance of virtuous living and the cultivation of good qualities (*pāramitā*) rather than the



Fig. 4: Ajanta, Cave 10: Part of a scene depicting worship of the Bodhi tree

philosophical and doctrinal import of Buddhism. Along with Jātaka stories, scenes from the life of Buddha as Gautama—his birth in the Lumbini garden, events of his childhood, Māra's futile attempt to tempt him, his attainment of the highest knowledge, the conversion of Nanda, subjugation of Nalagiri, were painted on the walls. The near realistic and yet imaginative depiction of the Jātaka stories must have created a deep impression on the devotees of the spiritual grandeur of Buddha and the creed he preached.

The subject-matter of the early paintings in Caves 10 and 9 (circa second and first century B.C. respectively) appear to be worship of the Bodhi-tree and *stūpa* by a royal party (fig. 4). In Cave 10 are also painted scenes from the *Chhaddanta Jātaka* and *Sāma Jātaka*. In all these paintings, we do not notice any pictorial rendering of the Master for such a depiction was forbidden by the Master and was not, therefore, employed by the Theravāda artists. Instead, they depicted Buddha symbolically by painting either the *Bodhi* tree, the throne, the wheel, the *pādukas* or *triratna*.

However, under the growing influence of Mahāyāna many more caves were added and were simultaneously embellished with paintings. This middle period of painting, commencing from the last part of the fifth century A.D. specialized in the depiction of narrative stories from the Jātakas and *Avadānas*. The *Mahājanaka Jātaka* (Cave 1) elucidates the manner in which the Jātaka stories were narrated. Besides the *Mahājanaka Jātaka*, the important Jātakas and *Avadānas* painted on the walls of Ajanta are:

- Śaṅkhapāla-Jātaka*, Cave 1
- Chāmpēyya-Jātaka*, Cave 1
- Vidhurapandita-Jātaka*, Cave 2
- Vessantara-Jātaka*, Cave 17
- Hamsa-Jātaka*, Cave 17
- Siṃhalāvadāna*, Cave 17
- Śibi-Jātaka*, Cave 17

The delineation of Mānushī Buddhas in human form was another subject in which the artist took great delight and interest. The painting of Mānushī Buddhas on the door of Cave 17 is very interesting from iconographic point of view.

The ceiling of the *vihāras* were also painted with a variety of subjects. The growing influence of the Mahāyāna creed brought in its trail ideas of the Buddhist paradise and as a result celestial beings like *kinnaras*, *vidyādharas* and *gandharvas* soaring in the heavenly regions amidst clouds were depicted. Floral patterns, geometrical designs jewelry-motifs mythical beings, playful birds and humans were portrayed on the ceilings (plate XI). A decorative band in the roundel on the ceiling of the *yaksha* shrine in Cave 2 shows a chain of twenty-three geese amidst a lotus-creeper, each goose rendered naturalistically and yet differently from each other



Plate XI. Ajanta, Cave 2: part of ceiling decoration

so as to evoke admiration for the artist who produced their graceful movements. The roundels with concentric bands of variegated colours and patterns around a central lotus with a *gandharva* figure or couples in the corners amidst clouds were a very common composition of the ceiling decoration.

The tradition of painting the flat ceilings of caves in compartments such as those seen at Ajanta is noticed in Tun-huang caves in north-central China and also in the Bamiyan caves in Afghanistan. This arrangement follows a pattern, for these compartmentalized paintings indicate the beams and cross beams of structural buildings. Even the roundels appearing in architectural compartments are ingeniously integrated with architectural elements.

Many paintings bear painted inscriptions indicating that it was the gift of some *Śākya bhikshu* for the attainment of supreme knowledge by all



Plate XII. Ajanta, Cave 1 : Bodhisattva Padmapāṇi

beings. In one inscription the gift is said to endow on the donor good looks, good luck and good qualities. The miracle of Śrāvastī was also a very popular subject at Ajanta. Rows of Buddha figures, one above the other, came to be painted so as to depict the Thousand Buddhas. In Cave 2 there is an inscribed record mentioning the subject as 'Thousand Buddhas' (*Budha Sahasa*).

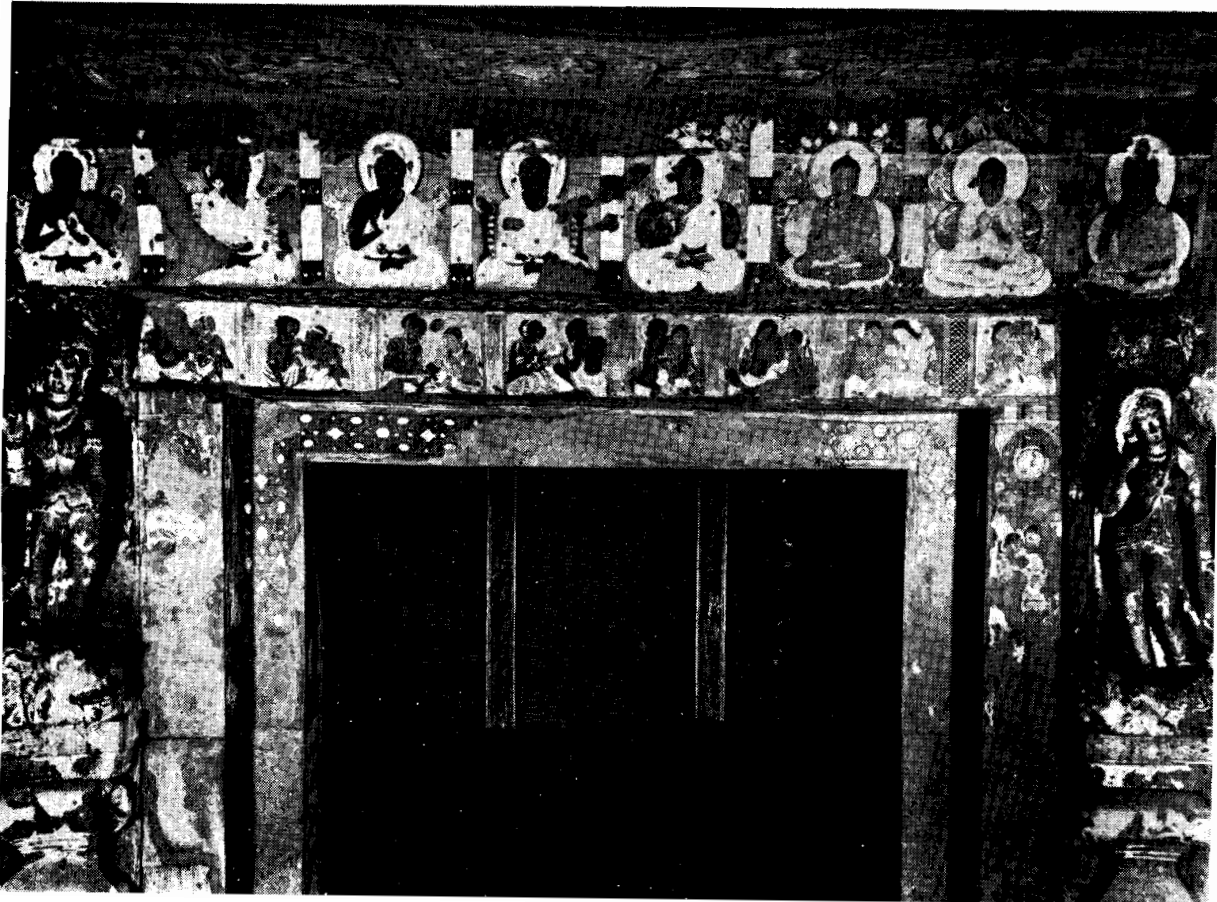
Placement of subjects

The narrative subjects at Ajanta are painted on the expansive canvas of the walls and have no formal imitation of frames. A story may cover the entire wall and at times extend on the adjacent wall, at an angle of ninety degrees (*Mahājanaka Jātaka*). A few scenes appear in panels and these are painted on pilasters like the famous toilet-scene in Cave 17. The painted scenes on the walls of the *yaksha* shrine and the Hārītī-Pāñchika shrine in Cave 2 form a total composition showing worshippers approaching the *yakshas* and Hārītī-Pāñchika images for worship. In the case of the *yaksha*-shrine, the setting of the painted scene is placed in temporary structures like those erected in a fair while the scenes in the Hārītī-Pāñchika shrine are placed in the garden surroundings and are framed by delicately curling foliage.

The famous panels of Bodhisattva Padmaṣāṇi (plate XII) and Vajrapāṇi on the back wall of the hall, on either side of the *antarāla* also conform to a plan. They usher a visitor to the magnificent image of Buddha in the sanctum sanctorum. The trinity formed by the Buddha in the centre and two Bodhisattvas on either side is depicted in sculpture and painting.

The back wall of the verandah of Cave 17 fortunately retains a fair amount of paintings and thus helps in understanding the manner the

Plate XIII. Ajanta, Cave 17 : paintings and sculptures on the entrance



exposed portion of the Cave which received brilliant sun-light were treated. Here, above the door lintel, are painted the Mānushī-Buddhas with the *gandharva* couples below it in the long frieze. The sculptured *vīkshikās* above the door-frame are also plastered and painted forming part of the total composition (plate XIII). On either side of this magnificent door-frame are painted figures of *gandharvas* descending from heavenly abode and in an attitude of obeisance to the Mānushī-Buddhas. However, further wall space, on either side, is devoted to the depiction of a Jātaka story (*Vessantara Jātaka*), subjugation of Nalagiri, an incident from the life of Buddha. Flanking the entrance were also painted figures of Bodhisattvas. The short end on one side of the verandah depicts the wheel of *samsāra*. The total effect is enhanced by the treatment of the ceiling. It will thus be appreciated that the painting, sculptures and architecture in each cave were so integrated so as to enhance the cumulative effect.

The late paintings at Ajanta consist of paintings of Buddha and the Bodhisattvas. They are painted on architraves and pillars in Caves 10 and 9. To the same period can also be attributed the subject like the Miracle of Śrāvastī and these are usually painted on the walls of the antechamber (*antarāla*).

A word is also necessary about the lighting arrangement for seeing the paintings. There are indications to suggest that when the paintings were actually drawn, oil lamps were used. These were suspended to iron hooks found embedded in the plaster. This feature has come to light as a result of close observation in the recent past. Normally the paintings were seen by devotees during day time. It is our experience that after entering the cave it takes some time for the eyes to get adjusted to the dim light. It is not unlikely that white cloth sheets were used for reflecting light. Thereafter, on the dark walls appear myriads of figures as if issuing from the wall surface and taking definite shape and form. The caves get beautifully illuminated when the rays of the setting sun penetrate the caves through doors and windows and the walls are bathed in the reflected glory of the sun's rays. It is a wonderful experience to watch the figures in normal light and to appreciate the effect of shading and of thick and thin lines which help in bestowing plastic modelling to the figures drawn on the flat canvas.

The various episodes from the Jātakas come to life with an almost dramatic appeal for the artist has employed various *rasas* or aesthetic moods in the delineation of the subject. However, the paintings are steeped in two dominant moods: *karuṇa rasa* (compassion or pathos) and *śānta rasa* (placidity or peace). All the other *rasas* such as *śrīṅgāra*, *hāsya*, *vīra*, *raudra*, *bhayānaka*, *vībhatsa*, *adbhuta* are subservient to these. These *rasas* perform the same function as in a drama where situations are created which are at once full of pathos and gaiety to the extent of evoking laughter.

The *Vishṇudharmottara* describes the blemishes and merits of paintings. The eight merits of paintings, according to the author, are: *sthāna pramāṇa bhūlambho madhuratvaṁ vibhaktatā sādṛśyaṁ kshayaṃṛiddhi cha guṇāṣṭaka-īdān-smṛitain*. The same subject is dealt with by Yośodhara, in the commentary on the *Kāmasūtra* where the limbs of painting are described as six-fold: appropriate representation of form (*rūpabheda*), correct structure or proportion (*pramāṇam*), infusion of action and feeling (*bhāva-yojanam*), infusion of the quality of grace (*lāvanyaṁ yojanam*), similitude or likeness (*sādṛśyam*) and the last dealing with the use of brush and colour. The quality of *sādṛśya*, however, which is very important is not intended to portray the mirror-like likeness but the essential realism of the portrayed. At another place the *Vishṇudharmottara* makes this point of *sādṛśya* very clear. It mentions that the artist must be able to delineate the distinction between a sleeping person and a dead person. The former must be shown full of life force while the dead person completely devoid of it.

The Ajanta paintings have great aesthetic quality and that they exude warmth and as it were 'breathe' and 'smile'. The *Vishṇudharmottara* describes this quality as follows :

*'Lasatīva cha bhūlambho shishyatīva tathā nṛipa hasatīva cha
mādhuryaṁ sajīva iva dṛśyate'
'Sāsvasya iva yachchitraṁ śubhaiakshṇam'.*

'The painting glistens and embraces by its disposition as if coming out to meet the spectator and smiles with grace and appears absolutely full of vitality'. 'It breathes and such a *chitra* is really full of all auspicious signs'. It is this quality of Ajanta paintings which keeps the visitors spellbound. He forgets his existence and is lost in ecstasy. The exquisite colour-taste, perfect brush-work and sense of modelling lend such vividness to the pictures that they have an irresistible dramatic appeal. The artist is so careful about minor details in building up the narrative effect that one almost feels the breeze which makes the ornaments and the banners painted on the walls swing and sway and flutter.

In the narrative scenes hundreds of figures are painted yet each and every one of it is distinct from the other. The different episodes in the compositions are separated by the clever use of architectural features, and vegetation. The difference in space and time from one incident to the other is also brought out by clever dispositions of scenes away from each other and in appropriate surroundings. Individual scenes are characterized by perfect grouping of figures, the principal character being given the greatest attention and is usually placed in the centre. The episodes in the *Mahājanaka Jātaka* illustrate this point very beautifully. The artists sometimes take the liberty of not portraying essential architectural features so as to depict the scene without any hindrance. For example, the pillar of the structures under which a dance-scene is depicted is indicated but not painted lest it obstructs the view of the dance (plate XIV).



Plate XIV. Ajanta, Cave 1 : scene from the Mahājanaka Jātaka depicting a dance

The greatest quality of Ajanta paintings is, however, that it is imbued with feeling and can be appropriately called a *bhāvachitra*. *Bhāvachitra* is defined as that type of painting where the *rasas* such as *śringāra*, etc. are revealed to a person by mere observation and which create wonder in mind (*śringārādiraso yatra darśanādeva gamyate/bhāvachitraṃ tadā-khyataṃ chittakautukakāraṇaṃ*).

It will thus be seen that the Ajanta paintings conform to the highest standards laid down in the *Vishnudharmottara*. In fact one feels that the text of *Vishnudharmottara*, which is later in date than Ajanta, codifies all the norms and standards which the Ajanta artists prescribed for themselves. The painting is described in *Vishnudharmottara* as possessing the quality of dispelling anxiety and bringing forth prosperity and the cause of unequalled and unmixed delight. It fulfills the main objectives of human life, namely *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *moksha*.

The influence of Ajanta paintings was felt over a wide area in Ceylon, Nepal, Tibet, Afghanistan, Mongolia, China, and even distant Japan came under its influence. The Ajanta mannerism is seen in the paintings of all these countries to a smaller or greater degree. The paintings at Sigiriya in Ceylon are closest to Ajanta. They almost appear to be an extension of the Ajanta tradition. The wall paintings at Bagh, about 250 kilometres north of Ajanta, suggest that the artist employed at this place belonged to the same school.

Ajantaism assumed new forms in different spheres and in remote climes. Says a Sanskrit poet:

*kshane kshane yaṁ navatām upaiti tad eva
rūpaṁ ramanīyatāyāḥ*

‘the nature of beauty is such as assumes new forms every moment’, so does the art of Ajanta.