

Subject: History (H)

Semester: 4th

Paper: SEC-B (2): Art Appreciation: an Introduction to Indian Art.

Topic: **Ajanta Cave Paintings**

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1.1 Introduction

The rock-cut caves of Ajanta, carved out of granite cliffs in Wagora river valley near Ajanta village in the Aurangabad district of Maharashtra, house possibly the finest and earliest surviving wall paintings (frescoes) of the ancient world. The wall paintings there belong from circa 1st to 7th A.D., reaching its zenith during the Gupta period. Most of the paintings depict Buddhist subject. It was accidentally discovered by a British hunting party headed by Captain John Smith in 1819. Since then many orientalist, archaeologists and indologists have helped to unveil this great wonder of the world. The site is a protected monument in the care of Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and was designated UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983.



AJANTA CAVES, MAHARASTRA

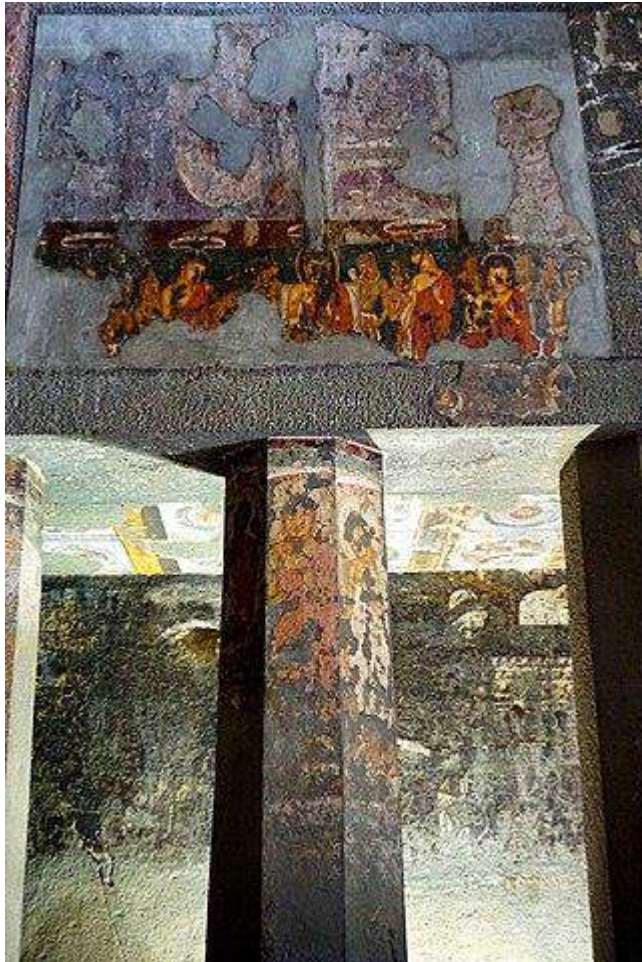
1.2 A Brief History of Ajanta Cave Paintings

The Ajanta cave paintings belong from circa 1st to 7th A.D. Out of 29 Ajanta caves only 16 were recorded to have contained painting in greater or lesser degree in 1879. At present paintings in only 6 caves out of 16 exist. These caves are 1, 2, 9, 10, 16 and 17, and in all of them the whole of the walls and also pillars and ceilings have been painted. When it is understood that some of these halls measure over sixty feet square, the painting that remains represent a very considerable quantity. On the basis of periods of time the frescos of Ajanta may be classified as under:

- a) Caves 9 and 10 *circa* A.D. 100.
- b) Pillars in cave 10 *circa* A.D. 350 (perhaps later).
- c) Caves 16 and 17 *circa* A.D.500.
- d) Caves 1 and 2 *circa* A.D 626-628.

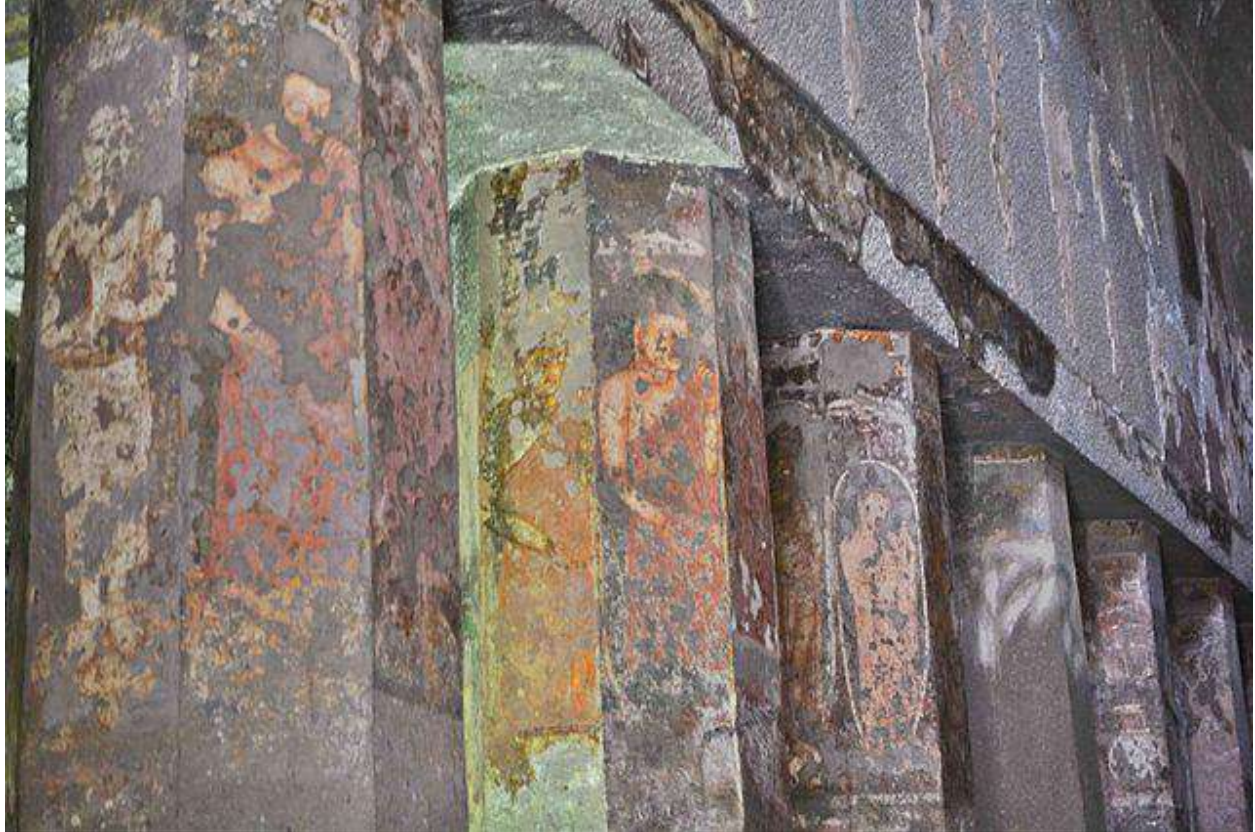
The paintings in caves 9 and 10 are the oldest and appear to have been executed when the surrounding country was under the rule of a dynasty of Dravidian kings (c.27 B.C.-236 A.D.).

They bear some resemblance to the sculptures of Bharhut, Amaravati and Sanchi.



FRESCO WITH BUDHA IN ORANGE ROBES AND PROTECTED BY CHATRA, CAVE-9

The presumed date of pillars of cave 10 is about c.350 A.D. and coincides with the Gupta period when great encouragement was given to all forms of art. The paintings here are mainly single figure subjects and bear a close resemblance to the Gandhara (Greco-Budhist) sculptures of the North-West Frontier.



THE BUDHA IN LONG, HEAVY ROBE, A DESIGN DERIVED FROM THE ART OF GANDHARA, CAVE-10 PILLAR PAINTINGS.

Caves 16 and 17 of the series depict the Buddhist art as it was practiced in the 6th century. At this time the region was under the rule of Vakataka dynasty. Some of the compositions of cave 16 are exceptionally fine, notably the treatment of figures with a pagoda-like architecture. Works of cave 17 are representative work of the Buddhist School. A fresco of cave 17 illustrates the Maha Vamsa Jataka.



DEPICTION FROM HAMSA JATAKA, THE BUDHA AS THE GOLDEN GOOSE IN HIS PREVIOUS LIFE, CAVE-17

The latest paintings of all are to be found in caves 1 and 2. The paintings of cave 1 are strong, confident and emphatic in its meaning. It contains the famous painting of 'The Great Renunciation'. The paintings of cave 2 reflect the state of religion at that time. It showed restlessness and there were mixture of both Persian and Chinese influence. The paintings depict the Hamsa, Vidhurapandita, Ruru, Kshanti Jataka tales and the Purna Avadhana.



ONE OF THE FOUR FRESCOES FROM MAHAJANAKA JATAKA, THE KING ANNOUNCES HIS DECISION TO ABDICATE AND BECOME AN ASCETIC, CAVE-1



A SCENE FROM VIDURAPANDITA JATAKA: THE BIRTH OF BUDHA, CAVE-2

1.3 Salient Features of Ajanta Cave Paintings

- The Ajanta paintings are wall frescoes.
- These paintings are not the product of a single undertaking. In fact, it resolves itself into a number of distinct groups, representing various styles and period.
- These paintings depict mostly Buddhist subjects and mainly illustrate the Jataka incidents from the previous lives of Buddha.
- Most of the compositions are of heroic proportion.
- Centrality is one of the main features of the compositions. So that attention is at once drawn to the most important person in each scene.
- Another important feature of Ajanta paintings is treatment of gesture, especially in the expressive action of hands.
- In sentiment the art is intensely emotional, uplifting the observer by its forceful expressiveness.
- Ajanta paintings have been executed by artist priest.

- The technical process by which these paintings were executed is considered by artists to be tempera and fresco.

1.4 Method of Ground Preparation

Over the surface of rough excavated wall of rock a mixture of clay, cowdung and pulverized trap rock was applied to the thickness of 1/8th to 3/4th of an inch. This ground was then coated with an exceedingly thin layer of white plaster about the thickness of an egg shell. On this polished shell-like surface the frescoes were painted in water colour.

As to the actual process employed in the application of pigment there is a considerable difference of opinion. It was either 'true fresco' (the fresco buono of Italian artists) or a combination of this method and tempera painting (fresco a secco).

1.5 Painting Technique

After the completion of ground preparation the composition was sketched out by the artist in bold red and was subsequently corrected in many places with a strong black or brown line. Thereafter a thin semi transparent terraverte monochrome was applied. Over the preliminary glaze the Indian artist worked in local colour- red, yellow, brown and blacks.

1.6 Suggested Readings and Documentaries

Percy Brown, *The Heritage of India: Indian Painting*, Oxford University Press, London.

Partha Mitter, *Indian Art, Oxford History of Art Series*, Oxford University Press, 2001

Painting of India- Enchanted Ajanta, Doordarshan National, www.youtube.com

<http://youtu.be/a1SdRCHESM> https

