

# THE PAINTINGS OF AJANTA AND ECHOES IN OTHER BUDDHIST SITES

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The wall paintings or murals of the Ajanta Caves, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, are one of the earliest examples of Buddhist paintings as they are extant in India today. The world of Buddhist paintings are many layered and multifaceted, covering paintings on cave walls to silk tank has using plant and mineral paints to the now new synthetic colours. This paper tries only to understand the paintings as they have been found on the cave walls of the Ajanta caves at Aurangabad, Maharashtra. Padamshree Prof. M.K. Dhavalikar quotes from the Discovery of India to describe these wonders “Ajanta takes you back to a distant, dream-like but real world.” [RK Singh interview with Padmashree MK Dhavalikar, Sept 25, 2015] Buddhism is not a religion held to have been revealed by the Divine, a received religion. It is a philosophy that developed from life and lived experiences. Ajanta paintings had been initiated at a time when some of the schools of Buddhism were developing architectural forms and images that would accurately represent their beliefs. [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVMdttx4aTg>]

It is assumed that the extant materials are only a small and physically degraded portion of what once existed. I personally recall visiting the Ajanta Caves as a primary school child and walking through caves lit by huge stage lights to help the tourists see better in the dark. Even with these lights the paintings were not well lit and the heat of the lights must have amply aided the deterioration of the paintings. The question is how would the original artists have created such detailed and huge paintings with practically no natural light? It calls to mind the enormous applause still received by Michael Angelo for painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel while lying face up on a make shift raised platform. The painters at Ajanta have created equally majestic wall and ceiling paintings under far more challenging conditions. They must have painted by lamp or fire light. Huntington has called Ajanta “an attempt to portray the artistic dimension of ancient India’s highest intellectual and technical achievements.” [Huntington, Susan L. 2014 Pxxix)

“Natural light as available inside is poor, and it changes from morning to evening depending on the position of the sun. The caves are semi circular in shape. When the sun rises, the other end towards cave 26 is lit. During the sunset the caves towards 1 and 2 near the entrance where the booking office is, are lit. This means that each cave has only a few hours of light inside reflecting the paintings. For most of the times paintings on the walls are plunged in near darkness. Ceilings of painted caves 16 and 17 receive light in the afternoon”. Singh, R.K., REPORT Published in Vihangama 2003 Vol. III (May - June)  
[http://ignca.gov.in/PDF\\_data/Capturing\\_Ajanta\\_Digitally.pdf](http://ignca.gov.in/PDF_data/Capturing_Ajanta_Digitally.pdf)

It is understood that the beginning of art comes from children’s play. Art is a medium for children to play and inter act with their surroundings through imagination.” Art is also a medium of understanding, to help children understand the concepts that are not yet known..... From children's artwork, can be taken the science that is important for human beings, namely regarding

the personal creative who is not afraid to experiment...2” Muchammad Bayu Tejo Sampurno. Learning through children's paintings. International Journal of Humanities, Art and Social Studies (IJHAS), Vol. 3, No.2, PP9-16. May 2018

## **2. THE WORLD LEARNS OF AJANTA**

The caves at Ajanta appear to have been built in two phases between 2nd BCE to 4 CE.[ Manager Singh and Babasaheb Ramrao Arbad. Architectural History and Painting Art at Ajanta: Some Salient Features.

The final stage of excavating the caves and decorating them appears to have ended by 5th century CE. The area was difficult of access and lay depopulated and unattended for many generations after the last stages of cave building ended. The Ajanta Caves are mentioned in the Hiuen Tsang/Xuanxang and by an official of Akbar's Court in the early 17th century. The existence of the caves was known to the locals during this time though they did not understand the full importance of the majestic creations. Finally in 1817, a local cowherd led some British soldiers to the site to visit what he called a tiger's lair. The British Captain committed the first act of vandalism at Ajanta by scribbling his name. It is reported that at this stage the paintings had been in a fairly good state of preservation.[ Singh, Madanjeet. Ajanta. P, 1965. Edita Lausanne. Switzerland ] The news of the caves reached the outside world and soon drew a wondrous international applause and praise for the unbelievable achievements they portrayed. Firstly, there was the technical skill of cutting into rock, planning and excavating the caves and then the extraordinary proficiency of creating the exquisite sculptures and the paintings. The Ajanta Caves are one of many similar sculpted and painted caves that were created among the hills of the Western Ghats. The artists' skills at sculpting and painting could not have matured in a day. There must have been long years of experimentation on similar material. Unfortunately, we have not yet discovered this evidence.

## **3. INITIAL ATTEMPTS TO PRESERVE THE AJANTA PAINTINGS**

The glorious art works attracted world interest almost immediately and James Burgess and William Gill made copies of some of the paintings and exhibited them in London in 1866. Unfortunately almost all of these perished in a disastrous fire. Later some copies were made by Griffiths and Lady Herringham, and published in 1896 and 1915. A team from Calcutta, including Nanda Lal Bose worked at Ajanta to make copies of the already fading paintings. Then, under the patronage of the Nizam of Hyderabad, [The Ajanta caves were then within the territory of the Nizam.] Mehri Yazdani, the Iranian painter, edited and published two volumes on the paintings in 1933.[ The Ajanta caves were then within the territory of the Nizam.]

Meanwhile, after centuries of cloistered protection, the crowd of visitors and vandals entered the caves and there are reports of some English men peeling away entire figures from the walls and taking them away. By the time the Nizam of Hyderabad sent the art historian, Ghulam Yazdani, to survey the Ajanta murals in the 1920s, the murals of caves nine and 10 had already been damaged. Two Italian conservationists were called to restore them. Unfortunately, they coated the pigments with a thick layer of unbleached shellac. The shellac attracted grime, dust and bat dung, and quickly oxidized to a dark reddish brown that totally obscured the images from both travelers and scholars. In 1999, the Archaeological Survey of India's (ASI) began work on the restoration of these murals.

#### 4. THE CHRONOLOGY DEBATE

The 29 main rock cut caves at Ajanta are laid out in a semi circle on hill slopes that follow the curve of the Waghora river below. Hiuen Tsang/Xuanxang the great traveler and scholar mentions the caves though he may not have actually visited them. It is thought that in its prime the site accommodated several hundred teachers and scholars.[[http://chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php/Ajanta\\_Caves](http://chinabuddhismencyclopedia.com/en/index.php/Ajanta_Caves) ] Experts hold that the caves were clearly built in two phases. The first group of five caves is dated between the third and first centuries BCE. The second group of some 26 caves has been dated recently between circa 462 CE and circa 480 CE [ Spink, 2009

Rajesh Kumar Singh Talk on Ajanta ;  
[https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-94-007-3934-5\\_9797-1](https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007%2F978-94-007-3934-5_9797-1) ] [Rajesh Kumar Singh Talk on Ajanta ]Earlier, it had been thought to have been built between 400 to 650 CE.

Dr. Dhavalikar explains that Lord Buddha had recommended that the Bhikshus should not remain at one place except during the monsoons. Many rock cut caves were created as “Varsha Vaas” or shelter for the rainy season for monks.[ RK Singh interview with Padmashree MK Dhavalikar, Sept 25, 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVMdttx4aTg> ] The Ajanta caves are part of the larger chain of rock cut caves, monasteries and chaityas found in several sites of the Western Ghats. [ Swaminathan, Subramanian. Paintings: Ajanta Cave Paintings: the many Splendored delights of Ajanta. September 2007.<http://www.indian-heritage.org/painting/ajanta/ajanta.html> ]The earliest caves at Ajanta were excavated during the reign of the Satvahanas who had their capital at Pratishthana (today Paithan in Maharashtra). It appears that the state undertook the excavations of Caves 8,9,10, 13 and 15A in the 2nd and 1st century BCE.[ According to Prof. Spink, all the rock-cut monuments of Ajanta excluding caves nos. 9,10,12,13 and 15A were built during Harishena's reign. This view is gaining in popularity but not universally accepted.] This is said to be under Hinayana inspiration.

Though the Ajanta cave building had begun in about second century BCE, but the main burst of cave building and painting seems to have occurred within a short space of time during the reign of the Vakatakas, a dynasty that came into prominence in the Deccan from mid third century CE. The Gupta emperor Chandragupta II married his daughter into the Vakataka royal family

[ Marar, Anjali, Anjali Relics of a Dynasty, Decoded. The Indian Express, Jan 25, 2020, new Delhi.] and is said to have undertaken some battles in partnership with the Vakatakas in 4th century CE. Thus, part of the reign of the Gupta dynasty and that of the Vakatakas overlapped.[ Swaminathan, Subramanian. Paintings: Ajanta Cave Paintings: the many Splendored delights of Ajanta. September 2007.<http://www.indian-heritage.org/painting/ajanta/ajanta.html> ]

Prof. Walter Spink held that it was the Vakatakas, under the emperor Harishena, who were responsible for the second phase of the cave building and decoration at Ajanta. He argued that this was evident through careful analysis of Ajanta's development. This view was initially thought of as revolutionary but now this is being increasingly accepted and Spink's theory is now known as the "short chronology". Prof Spink concludes that the local wars and collapse of the dynasties that offered protection to the site had finally brought the construction at Ajanta to its end. [Schastok, Sara Weisblat .Short Chronologies at Arm's Length: Ajanta & Beyond. 2008. P1 Spink , W. Ajanta to Ellora. Marg 2011 ]

Prof. Spink remarks that Ajanta delineates and explains in detail the phases of Harishena's reign and provides information about the developments that took place. Dandin's *Dasakumaracarita* (The Tale of the Ten Princes) provides information that corroborates the indications found in the Caves.[ This short but brilliant period of creativity came to an end with the death of Harishena in 477 CE. The collapse of the Vakataka dynasty rang the death knell of creativity at Ajanta. Gradually the lay population, the monks and the artisans moved away from the hill top. Volume II of the Ajanta; Art and Development deals with a detailed analysis of the development of Cave 2 and his arguments around this. This volume also deals with the powerful result of the emperor Harishena's death upon the hill top community in its final few years of creativity The volume further deals with the Vakataka patrons' decision regarding the redecoration of the old Hinayana caves at the site. There has been some discussion among scholars with regard to the reason why the old Hinayana caves were not refurbished or restored at the same time.

## 5. WHAT WE FIND IN THE CAVES

The Vakatakas were noted patrons of the arts, architecture and literature. They led public works and built many monuments. There are records of caves excavated as evidence of their munificence even before the creation of the Ajanta caves. A number of Buddhist viharas and chaityas at Ajanta were built under the patronage of the Vakataka emperor Harishena (c. 475 - 500) who was a great patron of Buddhist architecture, art and culture. The inscription of the rock cut cave 16 of the Ajanta states that he conquered Avanti (Malwa) in the north, Kosala (Chhattisgarh), Kalinga and Andhra in the east, as well as Lata (Central and Southern Gujarat) and Trikuta (Nasik district) in the west and Kuntala (Southern Maharashtra) in the south. Thus, he would be a monarch with a well filled treasury. Much of the building activity at Ajanta occurred during the reign of Harishena and his local vassals as understood from the inscriptions at Ajanta. Three caves at Ajanta, caves 16 and 17 and a chaitya in cave 19 and cave 26, were excavated and painted during the reign of Harishena. Varahadeva, a minister of Harishena had the rock-cut Vihara of Cave 16 at Ajanta excavated. Cave 19 is a truly majestic structure with a portico and an elaborately carved semicircular window above. These stone structures appear to be copies of then prevalent wooden structures and their designs. Cave 19 also has very elaborately ornamented panels on either side of the entrance door depicting Lord Buddha probably sharing the promise of Lord Buddhahood with his young son Rahula. The carvings on both side panels are balanced and similar but not same. The Vakataka dynasty appears to have ended abruptly soon after Harishena's death in 500 CE.[ Swaminathan,Subramanian. Paintings: Ajanta Cave Paintings: the many Splendored delights of Ajanta. September 2007.<http://www.indian-heritage.org/painting/ajanta/ajanta.html> ]

## 6. THE PAINTINGS OF AJANTA

The Ajanta paintings are roughly contemporary with the Stupas of Sanchi which are said to have been commissioned by Ashoka in 3rd century BCE. Ludvico Pisani writing for the Global Despatches about the Ajanta Paintings “ ... The Ajanta wall paintings are famous for their masterful line-work, the use of natural pigments, the artistry achieved with only primitive tools, the sensual forms, and the harmony of the overall composition. “ He continues “An initial phase is made up primarily of the fragments in caves 9 & 10, from the second century B.C.” He mentions that the second phase of paintings started around 5th and 6th century CE. He further comments that the highly accurate pictorial technique used in Ajanta and the method of execution makes these wall paintings unique in the world. [Pisani, Ludvico.The Global Despatches: Ajanta Cave Paintings. ]

Art Historian Milo Cleaveland Beach writes “Ajanta, of course, provides virtually the only remaining evidence of styles of painting that first developed in India and then travelled with Buddhism to various parts of the Himalayan regions”. Later this style travelled along the Silk Route to Central Asia into China, Japan and Korea.[ Beach, Milo Cleaveland. Foreword]

Inscriptions in cave 10 of Ajanta indicate that these creations received community patronage from individuals like Kanhaka of Bahada and monks named Dharmadeva and Sikhabhadra. Cave 10 contains fragments that are perhaps of the oldest surviving painting of the life of the Lord Buddha and an image of the first sermon at Sarnath. There is a depiction of the legend of Udayana and his two queens, the "Shyama Jataka" about a forest dweller who was fatally hit by the poisoned arrow of the king of Varanasi and the "Chaddanta Jataka" about a virtuous six-tusked elephant are also to be found. The paintings illustrate the costumes of this period. The king of Varanasi wears a white cotton tunic wrapped around the waist with a cummerbund, while on his head he wears a turban. He has a bow and a full quiver of arrows. His guards are bare-chested and are armed with spears and bell-shaped shields decorated with half-moons and shining suns. The turbans of the different ranks are shown with great care and seem to be an important indicator of status, the different materials – some with red or gold stripes, others pure white – and the differing ways of tying the turban are all indicated carefully.

The paintings draw their subjects from the Jataka stories. An inscription in Cave 17 says that the paintings should bring well being to “good people as long as the sun dispels darkness by its rays.” All this was completed in semi darkness of the caves, including the exquisite Cave 1 with the Vajrapani (symbol of Lord Buddha's power), the Manjushri (Lord Buddha's wisdom) and the Avalokiteswara (Lord Buddha's Compassion). The entire ceiling is covered with geometrical patterns, flowers and other natural elements.[ Dalrymple, William, The Ajanta Murals: Nothing less than the Birth of Indian Art. The Guardian, King's Place, London. U.K. 15 August 2014.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/aug/15/mural-ajanta-caves-india-birth-indian-art>] Stories are recounted simultaneously and on several levels at Ajanta. The international acclaim given to the fifth-century masterworks has been so high that most scholars have all but ignored the earlier picture cycles. The earlier paintings were not only more fragmentary, they were also more smoke-blackened than the later murals.

John Huntington has drawn attention to the absence of Lord Buddha's image in the early period of Buddhist Art. It was surmised that Lord Buddha was represented symbolically. The depiction of a tree was held to represent Lord Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree and the wheel was thought to represent Lord Buddha's first discourse at Sarnath indicating the starting of the Dharmachakra. This practice was referred to as aniconism in Buddhist Art.[ Huntington, Susan L. . Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism Art Journal Pgs 401-408 ]

Kumar notes that the early Buddhist art of Sanchi and Barhut have profusely used the lotus symbol. Where the pillars and crossbars of the railings depict the Lord Buddha's life episodes, all vacant spaces are filled with various lotus depictions. The Lotus was and continues to symbolize immortality, prosperity, abundance and fertility. Similarly, Rao explains that the deer and the wheel was used in Buddhist art to symbolize the First Sermon; referred to as the turning of the wheel or Dhammachakkapavattana [ Rao, Manjushri. Lotus in Early Buddhist Art of Sanchi.]. The Bhikshus would choose seals or marks to indicate incidents of Lord Buddha's life that had occurred in the vicinity of their monasteries. Thus those around Kushinagara used the symbol of “coffin between the flaming sal trees” to depict the “mahaparinibbana” [ Kumar, Bimalendra.

Significance of Symbolising First Sermon of Lord Buddha at Sarnath] that had taken place at Kushinagara.

Those who compiled the earliest Buddhist scriptures never doubted that the Sakyamuni was a human teacher and a man of flesh and blood. But they also believed that he had achieved Final Enlightenment or “Nirvana” and thus the physical elements of his human body had disintegrated into a spiritual condition known as “parinirvana” the “ultimate extinction” of all worldly cravings and aspirations. Translations of the original Sanskrit canon of the Mula Sravastivadins in Tibetan and Chinese of the final journey tells that the Lord Buddha travelled from Rajgriha via Pataliputra and Vaishali to Kushinagara where he lay down and finally expired under two shora robusta (sal) trees. The villagers then asked Ananda how they should arrange for his funeral and Ananada replies that it should be as for a great king. Ananda advises that the body should be wrapped in multiple muslin cloths and placed in an iron coffin that should be filled with vegetable oil. Scented wood should be heaped upon the coffin and burnt. When the burning is done the wood should be cooled with milk and the bones gathered and placed in a golden vase. Then a stupa should be constructed over it and honoured with parasols, banners, flags, scents and music. A great festival should be celebrated honouring and venerating the remains.[ Snellgrove , David L. General Editor. The Image of the Lord Buddha. 1978 P8 ] The detailed instructions given by Ananada for the Cremation of the Lord Buddha clearly indicates that he was seen and understood as human being of flesh and blood.

## **7. PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING INDIAN ART**

Art, that is, sculpture, painting and even dance and music in ancient India had been majorly inspired by religion and the basic philosophies that shaped life. The Upanishads were composed about the eighth or ninth century BCE were based upon older traditions of knowledge in India. These continued to be refined and were a source of deep and profound influence upon religious thought in India.[ Behl Benoy K. The Ajanta Caves; Ancient Paintings of Buddhist India.Introduction P 11.] It was believed that seeing something truly beautiful, whether in nature or art, is akin to enlightenment and the veils of illusion could be lifted at that very moment. [Huntington, Susan L. The Art of Ancient India; Buddhist, Hindu, Jain. Pxxvi-xxviii. ] These murtis are thought to help focus one’s thoughts on the ultimate Truth and are therefore of immense merit and importance. Indian artists reached great heights of refinement and presented form in some complex new ways. The highly valued place of realistic perspective, colour and even forms of nature in visual representations of the Western world do not have the same place or even meaning in Indian Art. Perspective has a more evolved representation in Indian Art forms. Art in India would attempt to represent the thought and therefore many idols would be many limbed symbolizing their great dexterity or ability rather than the reality of the physical form. Decoration or ornamentation in Indian Art is thought to enhance the religious merit of the visual representation. Transcendental knowledge is described and represented as a gem in Buddhism. This has also led to the emphasis upon what was painted or sculpted and the identifying postures or marks of particular celestial beings rather than who painted or sculpted the art piece. There are few records providing the names of the artists who created the art items. The creator may very likely have been a group of artists or part of a guild rather than an individual. Prof. Dhavalikar [RK SINGH . Interview with Padmashree MK Dhavalikar Sept 25, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jVMdttx4aTg> ] has suggested that the monks could themselves have been the artists at Ajanta.

Huntington points out that the Milindapanha may be interpreted to have indicated that Lord Buddha images were not to be made.

“The King said ‘Is there such a person as the Lord Buddha, Nagasena ?’

‘Yes’

‘Then can he be pointed out as being here or there?’

‘The Blessed One has passed away by that kind of passing away in which nothing remains which could tend to the formation of another individual (anupadissesaya nibbanadhatuya). It is not possible to point out the Blessed One as being here or there.” [ ibid ]

Huntington further refers to the Mahaparinibbana where the Lord Buddha says “The truths and the rules of the order which I have set forth for you all, let them, after I am gone, be the teacher to you”. These may be interpreted as advising against the making of Lord Buddha images though there is no express order against such an action.

Then, Huntington discusses how the creation of images of Lord Lord Buddha came to be accepted. Lord Buddha had gained immense popularity in his lifetime and there was a strong desire, after he attained Nivarna, among his lay followers to gain merit by seeing Lord Lord Buddha as they had done during his life time. The only way to do so after his passing away was to create his images. There was and still exists the popular understanding that religious merit may be gained by looking upon the image of a deity.[ Huntington, John. The Origin of the Lord Buddha image: Early Traditions and the Concept of Lord Buddhadar Sanapunya. Chap 2 , P23-43 Studies in Buddhist Art in South Asia.]

## **8. THEORY AND PRACTICE OF PAINTING**

The sculpture and paintings of the rock cut caves in the Western Ghats and some other places in India are similar enough to suggest that a theory and practice was already in place in India at the time of the creation of Ajanta, even if they were yet to be recorded in writing. The entire process of completing the work at Ajanta (and some of it lies incomplete even today) spread over many centuries. Towards the end of this time the process of codifying and recording these practices appears to have started. It may be correct to say that the two processes developed simultaneously for awhile. The Chitrutra of the Vishnudharmottara is such a record and was probably the written formats of the practices that were already in vogue at the time of the creation of the Ajanta caves.[ Swaminathan, Subramanian. Paintings: Ajanta Cave Paintings: the many Splendored delights of Ajanta. September 2007.<http://www.indian-heritage.org/painting/ajanta/ajanta.html> ]

Chapter 43 of Chitrutra [The Chitrutra, originally written in Sanskrit, consists of 8 chapters or Adhyayas of a much larger work, the Vishnudharmottara Purana (Khanda-III, Adhyayas 35-43). ] was probably recorded in writing around the fifth century C.E. It is the oldest known treatise on painting in the world.[ [https://www.indianetzone.com/54/chithra\\_sutra.htm](https://www.indianetzone.com/54/chithra_sutra.htm) ] Chitrutra was first published in 1912 in the modern times; later the first English translation was rendered by Stella Kramrisch, at the request of Abhanindra Nath Tagore, in the year 1924 and revised and enlarged in the year 1928. She translates “A painting cleanses and curbs anxiety, augments future good, causes unequalled and pure delight, kills the evil spirits of bad dreams and pleases the household deity.” [ Behl; Benoy K. The Ajanta Caves; Ancient Paintings of Buddhist India. Introduction, P11 ]

Art was appreciated both as a temporal experience a spiritual one [Ibid ]. Kramrisch writes that the Vishinudharmaottara admits in several places that it is but repeating and compiling from older sources. But, she states that these appear to be lost to us. She states that the date of this text may be calculated partly from the chapters being copied from earlier texts and partly with the

custom of setting up statues of renowned persons with which the text deals. Kramerisch writes that the Vishnupurana cannot be dated earlier than the latter half of the 4th century CE.[ Kramerisch, S. The Vishnudharmottara - A Treatise on Indian Painting and Image-Making p 5 ]

Each chapter discusses different features of Indian painting.[ [https://www.indianetzone.com/54/chithra\\_sutra.htm](https://www.indianetzone.com/54/chithra_sutra.htm) ] Adhyaya 35 and 36 deals with the five types of males, their differing body proportions and colours. Adhyaya 37 similarly deals with the five types of females, their hair and eye types. This chapter also describes the general characteristics of a Cakravartin, the supreme ruler. Adhyaya 38 gives the details on auspicious marks that divine images, both sculpture and painting should possess. Adhyaya 39 features the different postures of figures. Adhyaya 40 describes how to mix paints, prepare the surface, and apply the paints. Adhyaya 41 defines four types of paintings. Adhyaya 42 prescribes the manner in which different heavenly and terrestrial beings may be depicted. Adhyaya 43 depicts the nine Rasas in painting and writes about sculpting on different types of materials. Finally in Adhyaya 43.37, it has been stated that the section on dance and the one on painting supplement and complement each other.

Some experts feel that by the 2nd century BCE, Indian art had found a style of its own, expressing movement, naturalism and contemplation. Some ancient records mention that mural paintings decorated the walls of houses, palaces and temples. Scenes of gaiety and love were used in private houses, while works about the supernatural were for royal palaces and places of worship.

## **9. ECHOES OF AJANTA AT OTHER BUDDHIST SITES**

Ajanta provides virtually the only evidence of painting styles that first developed in India and then travelled with Buddhism and perhaps trade to the Himalayan regions, and then to Central Asia, China, Japan and Korea. It is mentioned by Monika Zin[ R.K. Singh. Monika Zin in conversation with Rajesh Singh on Ajanta cave paintings [video interview] Sahapedia.org. <https://www.sahapedia.org/ajanta-cave-paintings> ] that it is probable that there were many other caves and shelters with similar paintings along the Buddhist trail in various parts of Asia but these have either not been discovered yet or are now destroyed. Thus, the paintings at Ajanta become even more important. [ RK Singh Interview with Monika Zin. 2016. “There are indeed direct connections. It has really surprised us. The research is still going on, so we do not have ready answers. For the time being the idea is that it was a time after 500 AD, maybe one generation earlier or later, a period we try to call Pax-Hephthaliana. The Hephthalites came from Central Asia and were in Bactria, Gandhara, Kucha region and also part of India. During this time, not only from Gandhara, but also from Central India or even Ajanta direct influences could come to the paintings of Central Asia. We are talking about Ajanta because we have Ajanta. Ajanta survived, other places did not. We have to be aware of that. There were probably many such Ajantas, maybe not hundreds but many places with wonderful paintings. Ajanta survived. There are certain aesthetics we have only in India but not in Gandhara, for example. Also certain literary sources were illustrated in Ajanta and not in Gandhara. In Gandhara we do have jatakas but not many. Also jatakas about animals were not popular in Gandhara.” ] “The Ajanta paintings are not just a milestone in the history of development of world art but they also convey unique insights about the life of ancient Indians and their culture”. [ Singh. Manager. . Architectural History and Painting Art at Ajanta: Some Salient Features ]

Ajanta can be found to have similarities with many paintings of a similar age, both in India and outside. The Buddhist caves of Bagh (5th century CE to 7th century CE), in present Madhya Pradesh were painted in a very similar style to the Ajanta Murals. Manager Rajdeo Singh [ Ibid ] holds that many iconographic styles have been taken from Ajanta to the nearby Bagh caves and



vice-versa indicating movement of skilled workers and craftsmen between these two Buddhist sites. Though these paintings are recorded to have been in existence till about 1950, they have practically disappeared today.

The second line of the expansion of the Ajanta influence started with the conquests of the Chalukyas in the Deccan in the 7th century and the Ahir, Badami and Pattadakal, partly inspired by the paintings at Ajanta. In this connection Barbadillo mentions the paintings of cave number 4 in Badami.[ Barbadillo , Eva Fernandez del Campo. The Imprint of Ajanta in Tibetan Art.: Nepalese Section of the Buddhist Route Expedition . ]

The Paintings at Ajanta had its echoes in the developing art of India in the late nineteenth and twentieth Century. Nolan Hawkins writes that there were several main players. E. B. Havell, Abanindranath Tagore, and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy were all major thinkers, writers and art historians who helped to change British opinions as well as Indian opinions as to what was considered 'Indian' art.

Mural painting perhaps inspired by Ajanta have been preserved in Himalayan valleys of the present-day Kashmir. [ Barbadillo .Eva Fernandez del Campo. The Imprint of Ajanta in Tibetan Art.: Nepalese Section of the Buddhist Route Expedition . ] Barbadillo further comments that technical and stylistic similarities exist between the Ajanta paintings and many of the Himalayan murals. Elements of Ajanta paintings may be traced in Tibetan art; as in Jokhang an old monastery in Tibet.

Buddhist Emperor Asoka (3rd century BCE) sent members of his own family to Sri Lanka to carry Lord Buddha's message. The Sinhalese Buddhists created the beautiful rock paintings of Sigiriya in about 5th century CE on top of a huge rock, 600 feet high. Part of the way up, under a rock overhang there are paintings representing bearers of gifts and offerings. Today some of these figures remain. It is thought that they were probably painted at about the same time cave No. 16 at Ajanta. While there are striking similarities in the composition and colours, there are also differences. The paintings at Sigiriya appear like a portrait gallery of court ladies with varying details of facial features, hair styles and clothing. The yellow ochre, red-brown and mineral green are similar to Ajanta but there was a copper blue that appears to have been added.

The imprint of Ajanta is seen in the Himalayan regions, Sri Lanka , Central Asia, China, Japan and South Eastern Asia.[ Barbadillo .Eva Fernandez del Campo. The Imprint of Ajanta in Tibetan Art.: Nepalese Section of the Buddhist Route Expedition . ] . The murals depicting the life of Lord Lord Buddha in the cave situated in Chhoser area of Mustang district bordering Tibet are also similar to those found in the Ajanta and Ellora caves of India. The paintings dated back to the 12-13th century. Earlier some paintings of 15th century had been discovered in nearby Lomanthang area at an altitude of 13,000 feet, 350 km north-west of Kathmandu.[ Barbadillo .Eva Fernandez del Campo. The Imprint of Ajanta in Tibetan Art.: Nepalese Section of the Buddhist Route Expedition. ]

The Butkara Stupa is an important Buddhist stupa near Mingora, in the area of Swat, Pakistan. It may have been built by the Mauryan emperor Ashoka. The discoveries of D. Facena in Butkara in 1956 prove the existence of a style of mural painting in which the Indian tradition may be said to have merged with the Greco-Buddhist tradition. In Afghanistan there are numerous examples of this type of painting, the most outstanding being Bamiyan, Kakrak and Foladi. Crossing the Pamir Mountains along with trade caravans and Buddhist pilgrims, the pictorial tradition that had taken birth in India reached Central Asia and China where there are complexes having mural paintings such as Qizil, Dandan Oilit, Khotan<sup>5</sup> and the very large Dun Huang complex, from

where the Buddhist painting tradition reached the murals of Horyuji in Japan. [ Ibid ]China also has large-scale Buddhist art heritage such as Mogao Caves and Yungang Grottoes. Mogao Caves or the Thousand Lord Buddha Grottoes form a system of 492 well-preserved cells and cave sanctuaries southeast of the center of Dunhuang in China's Gansu Province. These sites contain some of the finest examples of Buddhist art in China. These were greatly influenced by India from the very beginning. People can see the close relation in such features as architectural form, murals and stone carving between Mogao Caves and Indian Buddhist caves such as Ajanta and Ellora Caves. Caves constructed at Mogao during the 4th to 6th century showed a strong Indian influence both in sculptures and paintings. Dunhuang art is a product of communication, exchange and travel

The Horyuji Temple near Nara in Japan was founded in 607 CE by Prince Shotoku and is the only surviving Buddhist monastery from the Asuka Period in its original state. The complex, consisting of 48 listed buildings including a 5-storey pagoda, has the oldest wooden buildings in Japan. The interior of the Hall is made to resemble the Buddhist vision of paradise via brightly coloured murals on all four walls. There are 12 distinct panels, each measuring 3 x 2.6 metres (10 x 8.5 ft.) and depicting scenes with the Lord Buddha and bodhisattvas. The style is similar to paintings at the Ajanta caves in India and the Khotan of Western China.[ Cartwright, Mark. Horyuji 19 April 2017 <https://www.ancient.eu/Horyuji/> ]

The second aspect that is considered definitive for purposes of highlighting the influence of Ajanta on Tibetan art is the type of compositions used in the paintings. The Ajanta murals are characterized by a type composition having no formal limits. The scenes are threaded together, one merging with the other, in such a way that there is narrative continuum in which the most important moments are framed either in architectural pavilions, or else in circular compositions that attribute additional emphasis to them and make the spectator focus her attention on them. This type of composition avoids the linear sequence of the scenes. Ajanta Echoes to be found in paintings of other sites display this aspect of composition in their own particular ways.

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