



BUDDHIST WALL PAINTINGS OF AJANTA

A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY TELANGANA STATE MUSEUM, HYDERABAD

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Abstract

The artists of Ajanta appreciated the beauty of nature and the grandeur of the trees, the subtle charm of ferns and creepers, and the lovely forms and colors of flowers are profusely represented in their work. The pretty forms of birds and the striking figures of animals have been painted in a realistic manner, and sometimes in a conventional style to suit their decorative schemes. That their color sense was also highly developed is reflected in color schemes. The precision of their work is most admirable, the sweep of their brush is bold and vigorous and their coloring is pure and fresh. The Buddhist priest artists, who painted these great master-pieces in the early centuries of the Christian era were not only a great creative artist but interpretative geniuses. Most of the paintings represent the incidents from jataka the stories of the Buddha.

Introduction

Of the many wonders of India, perhaps, the greatest are the Ajanta caves; heaven in the solid rock of picturesque VVINDHYADRI hill sides in the Deccan trap, dating from the second century before Christ to the seventh century after Christ. They are epic in their grandeur and form the classical background for the plastic arts of India. Many of these are marvels for their great size and wealth of sculptural detail in their walls, pillars, verandahs and ornamental friezes, but the series of twenty-nine caves at Ajanta are specially celebrated for their largest collection of Buddhist paintings ever known. The site has become almost a pilgrimage for millions of people from all parts of the world.

They represent the work artists of different calibers. The earliest specimens show a well-developed art both in technique and high intellectual qualities. The art of Ajanta although deeply religious does not betray a narrow outlook on the pleasures of life. Side by side with bhikshus clad in plain robes, there are young girls in chick garments, their coiffures and jewelers exhibiting a highly refined taste. The human and spiritual aspects of life are very skillfully blended in the art of Ajanta.

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Particularly the artists of Ajanta depict the women in a variety of poses, nude or partially clad, rounded breasts and curved lips, large, lustrous dreamy eyes and the dark hair so minutely coiffure. The

women wear tight bodies modern brassieres, skirts and cholis, short striped saris, embroidered coats and diaphanous clinging costumes. The women wear ear-rings, pearl-garlands, rings and chains and crowns. Their ornaments were aesthetically depicted.

A.L. Basham says: "The splendid sculpture and lovely paintings with which they are adorned make them one of the most glorious monuments of India's past. Here we see the whole life of ancient India in a panorama. Here are princes in their palaces, ladies in their harems, coolies with loads slung over their shoulders, beggars, peasants and ascetics, together with all the many beasts and birds and flowers of India, in fact the whole life of the times, perpetuated on the dim walls on the caves by the loving hands of many craftsmen. Everything is gracefully and masterfully drawn and delicately modeled".

The paintings of Ajanta show the tempera technique of painting. The surface of the hard porous rock was spread over with a layer of clay, cow dung and powdered rock, sometime mixed with rice-husk, to a thickness of tree to twenty millimeters. Over this was laid a thin coat of fine white lime plaster which was kept moist while painting, and afterwards lightly burnished. All colors come from natural sources.

COPYING OF WALL PAINTINGS IN RETROSPECT

In the seventh century of the Christian era Buddhism rapidly declined in India, consequently the shrines and sanctuaries of that cult fell into gradual ruin and oblivion. These munificent Chaityas and viharas of Ajanta met with a similar fate and were lost to the literary world until 1819 when the man oeuvres of a company of British troops in the Vindhya-dri - range brought forth their existence into the lime-light.

Literally these caves are first mentioned by Huien-Tsang, the celebrated Chinese pilgrim who stayed in India for fifteen years in the first half of the seventh century, when Ajanta was approaching its decline, they are next mentioned by Maha Sudi, an Arab geographer in the tenth century A.D. and by an Asiatic explorer in 1306 A.D.

The first attempt ever made by a European to describe the caves was that of Thevenet, who gave the account of the caves of Ajanta and Ellora in 1667 A.D. since then Europeans have often visited and described the caves.

The first scholarly report on the caves was by James Fergusson who read a paper at the Royal-Asiatic society of Great Britain and Ireland in 1843 A.D. wherein he described the rock-cut temples of western India. Including those of Ajanta.

At the instance of the Royal Asiatic society, moved by Fergusson's report, the East India company recommended to the Government of India, the employment of major Robert Gill of the Madras Army for copying the paintings of Ajanta, Nawab Salarjung's estate, in whose jurisdiction the cave were situated, made handsome grants for the cleaning of the caves, and appointed a special staff for the safety of major Gill's life, because the country at that time was infested with bandits and robbers of the Bhil Tribes. The Salarjung estate was also arranged for the creature comforts of major Gill, and an elephant was placed at his disposal for his trips in the country. Major Robert Gill prepared copies in oil of about thirty paintings. Most of them were destroyed by fire in 1866 in the Indian court of the crystal palace at Sydenham where they had been displayed. Five of Gill's copies which had not been displayed escaped destruction. They were sent to the Indian Museum, south Kensington.

The Salarjung estate offered similar facilities to John Griffiths, principal, school of Art Bombay, when during the eighties of the last century, he with a part of his students made several visits to Ajanta to copy of paintings for the second time, because the majority of the copies made by Gill were destroyed in the fire at the cryostat palace, where they were exhibited, in 1866 Griffiths mission was financed jointly by the Bombay Government, the Government of India and the Nizam's Government.

Somewhat strange though the catastrophe may appear, yet eighty-seven copies of Griffiths, out of total of one hundred and twenty-five, were completely destroyed or damaged by fire on 12th June 1885 in the Indian Museum, south Kensington residence. Griffiths prepared his monumental work. 'The paintings in

the Buddhist caves at Ajanta' which was published under the authority of the secretary of state for India in 1896.

Lady Herring ham, an ardent lover of Indian art, and herself an artist of great talent, came out to India first in the winter season of 1906-1907, and she was so much fascinated by the paintings of Ajanta, that she paid a second visit in the winter of 1909-10 and a third in 1910-11. The result of her successive visits is the excellent volume, entitled the Ajanta Frescoes published by the India society in 1915. In her work at Ajanta, lady Herring ham associated with her both Indian and European artists notably Indian students-Syed Ahmad, Muhammad Fazluddin and Jalaluddin of Hyderabad and Nandalal Bose, Asif Kumar Haldar and Samaarendranath Guptha of Calcutta School of art-distinguished artistic in their later days.

Lady Herring ham was not satisfied with the attention paid by the Government of India to the preservation of caves, and in several of her letters addressed to the Nizam's Government pointed out the appalling condition obtaining that time. She further warned that if immediate steps were not taken to preserve the monuments, which are India's are India's most authentic specimens of art and culture, they would be lost to posterity. The letters of Lady Herring ham made a deep impression upon the Nizam's Government who were already anxious to save from further deterioration these great treasures of the country's artistic skill and intellectual achievement.

To preserve what remains of these paintings for future generations, the Nizam's Government created the Archaeological Department in the year 1914. In the same year the Nizam's Government had appointed two great artists-Khan Bahadur Syed Ahmad and Jalaluddin to copy the paintings with greater fidelity than before.

The world of art is deeply indebted to the munificence of the Nizam Nawab Mir Osman Ali Khan, the 7th Nizam of Hyderabad and the active encouragement of his able finance Minister Sir Akbar Hydari with the courteous help of Lord Curzon, the then British Viceroy of India. The Nizam of Hyderabad secured two distinguished Italian restorers, Professor Lorenzo Cecconi and Court Orsini, who removed the effect of injudicious varnishing done some years ago. They had been appointed for two winter seasons (1920-21 and 1921-22) at princely salaries of E400 per month, exclusive of their steamer, railway fares, boarding and conveyance charges during the entire period of their employment.

The repairs to the caves, the cleaning and conservation of the paintings have been carried out on such sound principles and in such a scientific manner that, these matchless monuments have found a fresh lease of life for at least a couple of centuries.

With the assistance of these two Italian experts, both the artists of Hyderabad, Syed Ahmed and Jalaluddin have traced the paintings to the best of their vision and skill and their copies were greatly acclaimed by the European artists. They were as good as the originals. They prepared a complete set of reproductions, as close to the originals as modern science and skill could make them, of what is perhaps the greatest artistic wonder of Asia.

Especially Syed Ahmad, who had been trained under Lady Herring ham copied nearly one hundred paintings to his credit. His efforts in this respect have been crowned with a great amount of success for his copies as regards 'tone' are distinctly superior to those made by previous artists. All his copies of Ajanta completed in the usual medium of water color on hand made paper, when Prime Minister Nehru visited orange Grove (the present KCP building, Hyderabad) for the first time; he had the foresight to acquire Syed Ahmad's water colors. Again, at Nehru's suggestions, these paintings were purchased to adorn the interior of Rashtra Pati Bhavan, residence of the president of India, in New Delhi. In fact, the credit also goes to Ghulam Yazdani, the first Director of the Archaeological department of Hyderabad state who had shown keen interest in bringing out these splendid paintings to the limelight through his projects of recopying them, setting them, published in his monumental work called Ajanta.

Along with these measures, a systematic scheme has been carried out to reproduce the paintings by photographic process in order to keep an authentic record of this priceless heritage of Indian art for posterity.

OH Browne, of the Hyderabad Electricity Department made some experiments in color photographs of Ajanta. Later, a British color photograph expert EL Vesey photographed nearly all the paintings of Ajanta during a period of five months. Vesey's negatives form the basis of excellent portfolios produced by Ghulam Yazdani's Ajanta, volumes published by Oxford University press, London in 1930, 1933, 1946, 1955, these reproductions are extraordinary successful, as we can see the Album which contains thirty-three plates in monochrome and sixteen in color which remain the standard work in the subject.

The Department of Archaeology under the guidance of Yazdani published an authoritative account of the paintings, both from the religious and artistic points of view, for the information of scholars and art connoisseurs, and issued a guide book in three languages, English, Urdu and Marathi and a series of picture post cards both color and monochrome for the public. Yazdani had done a signal service to the students of art world.

In 1947 the Government of Hyderabad appointed a committee to go into the question of the preservation and maintenance of the Ajanta and Ellora caves, with Ghulam Yazdani as the Chairman. The committee examined the problem in detail and made a valuable recommendations-on accommodation, catering, conveyance and travel facilities (landing grounds for air-services), supply of popular literature on the spot, and facilities to enjoy the scenic beauty of Ajanta.

In 1951, the parliament of India declared the caves of Ajanta along with a large number of other monuments in the former princely states, as monuments of national importance and two years later the archaeological survey of India took direct charge of the caves.

In 1956-57, the archaeological survey of India also initiated a scheme of preparing their faithful copies of Ajanta paintings. As a result of that, sixteen completed copies have been handed over to the national museum, New Delhi for display.

In 1954, Madan Jeet Singh prepared an album of reproductions of the paintings based on photographs taken by him. In the year 1955, UNESCO had come to an agreement with the Government of India to take photographs of Ajanta paintings. As a result of that, David L De Har port, who had stayed at Ajanta for nearly six months, prepared five hundred and eighty color transparencies and six hundred and seventeen black and white photo negatives. One set of photographs was in the custody of UNESCO and the other with the Government of India.

Twenty out of Har port's transparencies available in India were utilized in 1956 in an album of Ajanta paintings brought out jointly by the Archaeological survey of India and the Lalit Kala academy (Indian Academy of Fine Arts)

Not many people know that the replies of these great mater-pieces, done by Syed Ahmad and Jalaluddin, were on exhibition since 1930 in the state Archaeological Museum, Hyderabad. The museum houses nearly two hundred reproductions, but only twenty paintings are on display. The museum has become a state attraction for thousands of people from all parts of the country.

On the whole, the paintings constitute a unique record of Indian religious thought, social life, and artistic skill and as such are worthy of being preserved at all costs by the Government, as well as by the people of India.

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