The Art of Ajanta Caves

Introduction

Related to Buddhism, Ajanta is the most famous UNESCO world heritage site and is protected by the Archaeological Survey of India. It is an ancient rock-cut caves site which is located in Aurangabad district of Maharashtra state, 60 km away from Jalgaon Railway Station. There is a U-shaped cliff of a gorge of small river Waghora (Waghur) where 30 caves have been discovered. Lord Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and Jatak tales (based on Buddha's life) have been engraved and painted on the walls, pillars, and ceiling of the cave. These caves had been constructed during 2nd century B.C. to 5th century A.D., which are categorized as:

1. Chaityagrah (Chaityas): Cave Nos. 9, 10, 19, 26, and 29.
2. Viharas: The rest of the caves are the Viharas.

This Buddhist site has been discovered in 1819 A.D. by a hunting group of British officers. These caves are not in a sequence because they could not be discovered at the same time.

Main features of the caves are as follows:

i. Cave Nos. 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, and 15A belong to the earliest Hinayana phase of Buddhism which has been constructed during the 2nd century B.C. to 2nd century A.D. in which cave Nos. 9 and 10 are Chaityas (Stup halls) while Cave Nos. 8, 12, 13, and 15A are Viharas.

ii. The rest of the caves, related to the Mahayana second phase of Buddhism, are Vihara and Chaitya caves. They consist of a pillared verandah, a pillared hall, and cells along the walls. The back wall of the hall has the main Buddha shrine. Shrine images of Ajanta are grand in size.

iii. Cave Nos. 6, 11, and 15 are very specific because they had been constructed from 2nd century B.C. to early 6th century A.D. and decorated with both paintings and sculptures.
iv. Cave Nos. 1 to 8, 11, and 14 to 29 are concerned with the Vakataka Period, constructed from mid 5th century to early 6th century. Cave No. 9, 10, 12, 13, and 15A belong to **Satvahana Period**.

v. Cave No. 26 is very big and carved with a variety of Buddha images. The biggest and more remarkable one is the Mahaparinirvana image.

vi. Some of the Vihara caves are unfinished such as Cave Nos. 5, 14, 23, 24, 28, and 29.

vii. Ajanta is the only example that has the existence of paintings of the 2nd century B.C. to 6th century A.D. Many famous paintings, related to the Buddha’s life and scene from the Jataka tales, have their existence in Cave Nos. 1, 2, 9, 10, 16, and 17.

**Main features of the paintings are as follows:**

i. These paintings have a lot of typological variation such as outward projections, rhythm city in clearly defined lines.

ii. Body-color gets merged with the outline which creates the effect of volume. Colors are limited, no over stylization.

iii. The figures are broad with heavy proportion, events are grouped according to space and location.

iv. Buddha figures in Cave Nos. 9 and 10 are different from figures painted during the second phase of the 5th and 6th centuries A.D.

v. The next stage of development is observed mainly in the paintings of Cave Nos. 1, 2, 16, and 17.

vi. The paintings of Cave Nos. 1 and 2 are very orderly and naturalistic, well-integrated with the sculptures in the caves.
vii. It may also be observed that various skin colors are used in the paintings such as brown, yellowish-brown, greenish, yellow ochre, etc. which represent a multi-colored population.

viii. The theme of the paintings is the events based on the life of Buddha, the Jatakas, and the Avadanas.

ix. **Simhala Avadana, Mahajanaka Jataka, and Vidhurpundita Jataka** are the paintings that cover the entire wall of the cave, and **Chaddanta Jataka** has been painted with acute details and events.

x. The famous paintings of Ajanta cave **Padmapani** and **Vajrapani** have been painted in Cave No. 1. However, it is observed that the images of Padmapani and Vajrapani are very common in Ajanta but these are the best-preserved paintings.

Among the important patrons of Ajanta were Varahadeva (Prime Minister of the Vakataka king, Harishena), Upendra Gupta, Buddhabhadra, and Mathuradasa.
1. Padmapani Bodhisattva, Cave No. 1

**DESCRIPTION**

This painting has been painted on the back wall of the interior hall before the shrine antechamber in Cave No. 1. The Bodhisattva has been shown holding a Padma (Lotus) in his right hand. That is why this painting is known as ‘**Padmapani Bodhisattva**’. His wife and other citizens are looking at him in a disappointed manner but bodhisattva is passing through his way without any disturbance. Monkey and a few celestial are also depicted perhaps these are the part of mara's army that is trying to dissuade Siddhartha from the path of Buddhism. The main features of this painting are as follows:

i. He has large shoulders which create heaviness but three bents in the body creating a movement in the picture space.

ii. Outlines are merged with the body volume which creates the softness and three-dimensional effect.
iii. The Bodhisattva is wearing a big adorned crown, his head is slightly bent to the left.
iv. The eyes are half-closed and are slightly elongated.
v. The nose is sharp and straight, the body color is natural.
vi. The white beaded necklace attracts the attention of people.
vii. The lines are rhythmic, delicate, and defining the contours of the body. (viii) At the places of armlets, ribbons have been tied in a special manner.
viii. The thread over the torso is shown with fine spiral lines indicating its dimensions.
ix. Every part of the body is given equal attention.
x. Light red, brown, green, and blue colors are used in this painting
xi. The eyebrows, nose, lips, and chin contribute to the overall effect of solidity in the figure.
2. Mara Vijay (Cave No. 26)

Name : Mara Vijay (Ajanta Cave No. 26)
Place : Ajanta, Maharashtra, India
Medium : Stone (Relief Sculpture) rock cut
Artist : Unknown
Collection : Archaeological Survey of India
Circa : 5th Century A.D.

DESCRIPTION
This is the only sculpture based on Jatak Tales. It is engraved on the right wall of Ajanta Cave No. 26. In this sculptural panel Lord Buddha has been shown seated in Dhyan Mudra under a Bodhi tree. Mara (a demon) has also been shown riding his elephant Girimekhala to attack Buddha with his tenfold army (Lust, Aversion, Hunger, Thirst, Cowardice, Doubt, Hypocrisy, Stupidity, False Glory and Conceit) along with his three daughters Taha, Arati and Raga to dissuade Siddhartha from the path of Buddhism through different activities. The event shown in this sculpture is part of the enlightenment of Buddha. According to the narrative, there is a dialogue between Buddha and Mara, and Buddha has been shown with his right hand indicating towards the earth (Bhumisparsha Mudra) as a witness to his generosity. This relief sculptural panel is highly animated which shows a very matured sculptural style at Ajanta.

Main Features are as follows:
The composition of this relief is very complex and highly dramatic which generates considerable movement.
The figures on the left of this relief have shown Mara riding his elephant with his army consisting of various kinds of people including some with animal faces.
At the lower base, there are some dancing figures most probably of Mara's daughters with musicians and one of the dancing figures is dominant on the right lower end, has expanded her hands in dancing posture.
Other images of Mara's daughter have been shown contemplating how to disturb Siddhartha.
The army of Mara has been shown marching towards Buddha in the first half of the panel whereas the lower half of the panel shows departing the army.
Mara is adoring him and this is the theme of this sculptural panel Mara Vijay.
The centrally placed Buddha is in the posture of Padmasana and a Bodhi tree at the back has been shown by dense leaves.
This is the largest sculptural panel of Ajanta sculpted in the Makataka period at the end of the 5th century A.D.