



Arts

PORTRAYAL OF WOMAN IN THE CAVE PAINTINGS OF AJANTA

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Abstract

The thirty rock cut cave temples of Ajanta located near a village named “Ajistha” in Aurangabad district of Maharashtra state. The caves are carved in a half crescent shape overlooking the Waghora river. The caves are located at a picturesque location having beautiful natural surroundings. Because of this peace and godly environment Buddhist monks might have chosen this place for their artistic endeavour. The caves possess well carved sculptures, pillars, entrances and walls are embellished with beautiful paintings. The art of Ajanta flourished from 1st century BC to 7th century AD. The Ajanta art is considered as the classical age of Indian painting. The artists of Ajanta did not follow the law of perspective and represented the figures in its entirety rather than appeared through a normal eye. Ajanta artists tried to depict the whole view through horizontal bands. In the paintings at Ajanta, the background was painted at the topmost band, the middle part of the painting below it and the foreground below the middle ground.

Keywords: Colour; Spectrum.

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1. Introduction

Discovered by British army officers in 1819, many centuries after the eighth century record by a Chinese pilgrim, Hiuen Tsang, who came to India that time. At the time of discovery, the paintings at Ajanta were intact and in good condition but gradually damaged by the interference of visitors. Many British as well as Indian artists took over the task of copying the Ajanta murals later. The paintings were made from mineral colors on wet prepared surface on walls of the cave. The technique is called fresco. There are two types of caves at Ajanta- chaitya and vihara. Chaitya was a dedicated place for worshipping for Buddhist monks and viharas were used for living. Chaitya caves are larger than vihara caves and there is a stupa at one end of the chaitya caves. Cave no.19 is the biggest cave among all. Ajanta was an art shrine for Buddhist monks. Other than decorative designs and motifs, paintings depicting “Jataka tales” of Gautama Buddha and his teachings remained the central theme of paintings here at Ajanta. Cave no. 9,10,19,26 and 30 are

Beginning with abstract, schematic compositions without ground line or horizon, he displayed great mastery over the simple, balanced or regular composition, where the main central mass is supported by two masses on either side.¹

Despite of the damaged condition of paintings at Ajanta, these murals possess a unique place in Indian art for the aesthetic sense displayed in the paintings and the technique used to paint these murals. Now we will discuss here, paintings depicting women in different roles in caves at Ajanta.

Cave no.9 – This cave is a chaitya used for meditation and worshipping by Buddhist monks. The cave was painted about 2nd century BC and contain paintings related to both sects of Buddhism – Hinayana and Mahayana. The cave is carved in the shape of a horseshoe. There are 23 pillars in this cave. Oldest painting of the cave is the painting of a seated woman, which, Mr. Griffiths, discovered after rubbing the plaster of the wall. Another painting, “A Naga king with his attendants” is painted on the inner side of the front wall above the left window. In this painting, two Naga kings are painted in sitting posture and listening to the people of their state. The flying nymphs indicate a sense of motion in the picture.

Cave no.10 – This cave is a chaitya and considered as one of the oldest among these caves. The cave dates around first half of the second century B.C. This cave has paintings of different periods. There is a stupa inside the cave. And the cave is horseshoe shaped at the rear end. The king’s Procession, Shaddanta Jataka and Syama Jataka are some of the main paintings of the cave representing woman in main and supporting roles of the story. And there are also various figures of the Buddha, painted on different pillars.

In the painting “The King’s Procession, painted on the rear wall of the left aisle, there is a group of people along with king approaching the Bodhi tree and Stupa for worshipping. In this picture of procession there are pedestrians in front, then horse riders and behind them is king with eight ladies and it appears that they are walking in speed. Two ladies in the painting are carrying bone casket and one woman is carrying a pot of sacred water. The woman in this painting are naked above waist. These women are wearing simple ornaments and have veils over their heads. Hairstyles vary among women from elaborate to simple. The lower part of the painting is damaged now. The women in the painting appear elegant and excitement is also visible on their faces. In this view of procession, women became an integral part of the picture. Artists painted them in expressive way.

Another painting “Shaddanta Jataka” is painted here. The artists cum Buddhist monks painted elephants enjoying in water. Various kind of trees are painted and in one picture of six tusk elephant is painted giving lotus to female elephant and in another picture, saving himself from python. This picture shows the artists love for life and nature and also shows their efficiency in painting animals and birds. Two hunters sent by the queen of Kashiraj enter the forest and six tusks elephant surrender himself before the hunters. In the last scene, hunters are seen entering the Kashiraj’s palace. Subhadra, Queen of Kashiraj was female counterpart of Shaddanta elephant in previous birth. She orders the hunters to bring the tusks of the Shaddanta elephant. When the hunter

brings the tusks, the Queen faints at the sight. At the incidence, the king gives support to the Queen. Four maids standing behind get upset and one maid is stepping out for giving support to the queen.

The elegance of the figures and facial expression reflect late Sanchi sculpture.² Both the expressions of revenge and guilt are painted successfully on the face of Queen Subhadra. Artists proficiently painted the woman in different roles and with expressions and suitable environment. Portrayal of woman at Ajanta is beautiful in its different forms and roles, nowhere woman is shown ugly or with disrespect.

Cave no.16 – This cave is a vihara and situated in the middle of all caves. Paintings in this cave were painted during the Gupta period. This vihara cave have maximum number of paintings. The cave has twenty pillars/columns and it has no small chambers inside the cave. This cave has paintings of high quality but unfortunately many important paintings of the cave got damaged and disappeared gradually with time. Cave no.16 provides a pleasing view of the ravine. “Dying Princess” a famous and a great painting at Ajanta painted on the left wall. Quality of representation of gestures and facial expressions are extremely beautiful and reached its height with this painting at Ajanta. In this situation of grief, when Gautam Buddha’s brother Nanda became a Buddhist monk and sent his headwear to his wife “Sundari” as information about his renunciation, his wife “Sundari” is shown in extreme grief, with drooping head, half closed eyes and languid limbs, reclining on a bed. In this painting, an old man with white turban and holding king Nanda’s headwear is standing near the door. A maid servant is supporting and raising “Sundari” upward, two maids are standing at the left-hand end of the painting and three towards the right. Two maids are standing under a banana tree in an open court. One of them have fair skin and other one has dark skin tone. Other members sitting around her on ground in the picture are crying in grief and they have no expectation that queen will get alive again.

As Griffiths, who spent thirty years at Ajanta, remarked: “For pathos and sentiment and the unmistakable way of telling its story, this picture, I consider, cannot be surpassed in the history of art.”³ He considered this painting as an excellent example of expression and kept it even above the art of Florence and Venice, by commenting that Florentine painter could have done better drawing and Venetian artist could have done better colour, but both of them could not have shown better expressions than this shown by the Buddhist artist. Today, though the painting is in damaged condition its fragments are sufficient enough to convey its greatness. Woman in the form of dying princess appears sophisticated and her eloquent gestures even in such situation of extreme sorrow show her beautiful with attributes of a Queen. The painting also shows the love of Queen for her husband, king Nanda. The Queen seems not strong enough to bear the separation of the king. All the folk around her understands her emotions and trying their best to support her standing beside her in this situation. The support and caring behaviour of queen’s maids are successfully shown by the gestures and her body postures.

Cave no.17 – This Chaitya cave is in better condition than other caves at Ajanta. And the paintings in the caves are also in a comparatively good condition. It is believed that there were 61 paintings in this cave. But most of them are not visible now, only few are in good condition. One can feel by seeing the paintings of this cave that this cave must have been painted by the best artists of that period, because these paintings are most beautiful, expressive and rhythmic.⁴ Most of the paintings in this cave are Jataka stories.

“Rahul Samarpan”, one of the most beautiful, expressive and famous painting in this cave is painted on the rear wall of the ante chamber to the left of the shrine door. Figures of mother Yashodhara and son Rahul are according to human proportion and Lord Buddha’s figure is painted three times larger than them. Lord Buddha is standing with bowl asking for alms. In this painting expression of Yashodhara offering her only son Rahul to the Lord Buddha is clearly visible. Yashodhara and Rahul are gazing at Lord Buddha and this gesture shows extraordinary resemblance to the situation. It appears that Yashodhara is offering her most important “Rahul” to Lord Buddha and she doesn’t have more precious than him to offer.

In this cave no.17, there are many paintings portraying woman in different roles and gestures. Some of them are – Indra and Apsaras on the rear wall of the veranda to the left of the door. The Manushi Buddhas and pairs of Yakshas and Yakshinis above the doorway in two rows, Apsaras and Gandharvas adoring the Buddha, A Yaksha with a female attendant on the left hand wall of the verandah, Shaddanta Jataka, or the story of the six tusked elephant on the outer wall of the front corridor, left of the main entrance, Apsaras and the Buddha in the teaching attitude on the pilaster between the front and the left corridors, Visvantara Jataka, or the story of the prince devoted to alms giving on the left hand corridor. A lady in the Beauty Parlour on the upper part of the pilaster between the front and right corridors.

On the back wall of the veranda towards the right of the door does the lyrical representation of Apsaras and Gandharvas adore the Buddha. The mystic ecstasy of Kalidasa’s poetry, the inspiration for which was derived from religious and moral sources, is depicted in this frieze with an incredible effect. The floating clouds, the swaying foliage and the heavenly bodies, apsaras and gandharvas flying swiftly through the air, produce a fantastic sense of movement and excitement. The finest of the figures in this panel is an apsara or heavenly nymph whose rapid flight through the air is indicated by her swaying necklace of sapphires and pearls and the ribbons and scarves which are shown fluttering behind her. She holds cymbals and wears a turban with astonishing decorative detail.⁵ At Ajanta the artists seem to have balanced physical and moral beauty and represented women in her perfection.

Painting of “A Yaksha and his consort” painted on the lintel above the main entrance leading to the main hall of this cave. A love making scene is shown here. A king is shown sitting taking support of a pillow, holding a bowl in one hand and the other hand is on his consort’s waist. The queen is slightly tilted towards king. Maids are standing near in service to the king and queen. The painting shows a remarkable sense of color and a controlled rhythm in execution. On this lintel, there are eight panels of mithuna figures, either sipping wine, caressing each other or talking in an amorous manner. The expression of woman in this love making scene of king and queen is truly graceful and decent, obscenity is not felt while seeing the painting. The Lady at her toilet, A lady of the court, A woman in a court scene, Sujata, the farmer’s daughter are some other paintings portraying woman beautifully in this cave.

Cave no.2 – This cave was excavated between 500 – 550 AD. Some scholars believe that paintings were also painted in this cave during 7th century. This cave is a chaitya cave. This cave also has many Jataka stories painted. The Painting of “Santivadi Jataka” is one of the best painting of this cave. As per the Jataka tales, Lord Buddha was Santiwadan Muni in one of his past lives. Without

acknowledging the king of Kashi, the ladies of the harem of the king has gone to listen to the teachings of Santiwadan Muni. When king woke up, he found himself alone and as a result, he got angry and ordered death penalty to the muni and the dancer lady. This painting is painted on the right-hand wall of the front corridor. In this painting the king is holding a sword in his hand and sitting on his throne. And the dancer lady is lying on his feet and craving for forgiveness. The posture of woman is shown kneeling at the feet of king, it appears that if she wants to get bury in the ground and she seems helpless and accepts her death penalty. Some of the women standing near her are trembling with fear and some are trying to hide their face. The painting seems so real filled with emotion that viewers can feel the pain for the lady dancer and unconsciously they start begging for forgiving her from king's anger.

Painting "Princess on the swing" is painted on the right side of this cave. Princess Irandvati is shown enjoying the swing in the garden. Artist has tried to paint the princess in her ideal adolescence and beauty. Her eyes are excellently painted in a dreamy look. She holds the rope naturally. Viewer can feel a kind of motion in this painting. Here, it's not exaggeration to say that the virginity and adolescence of the princess is exceptionally painted by the artists of Ajanta.



Figure 1: Mithuna Figures, Cave no.1, Second half of 6th century

Cave no.1 – This cave was excavated between 500 – 625 AD. Some paintings of this cave were painted during the last years of the Vakataka dynasty and some paintings were painted during the reign of Chalukya kings. This cave is a Vihara. Painting of "A wailing woman" is related to the story of king Nanda and Sundari. The lady is lying on bed in a deep sorrow. Some women nearby her are trying to dispel her grief. The painting is very real. There is a sense of tenderness in the posture of their hands and design of hairstyles. The figures appear somewhat heavy in look and their waist part is very sleek at some places. Figure 1: Mithuna Figures, Cave no.1, Second half of 6th century

Painting of a dancing lady in the court of Naga raja's palace is also painted here. A dancer is performing dance in the court of Nagaraja's palace. Breasts of dancer lady are painted heavy in form and waist part appears thin. A painting of "Chauribearer" behind the royal couple is also famous for its beauty and delicate posture. On the other part of the court scene, paintings of many mithuna figures have been painted. Their composition is very spontaneous and graceful.



Figure 2: The Wailing Women, Cave no.1, Early 6th century

Portrayal of woman in the paintings of Ajanta is very impressive and significant. They painted woman in innumerable situations and positions. Nowhere the artists have painted woman in ugly form. In the paintings of Ajanta woman is painted in an ideal form. Depiction of woman dominates here. Figure 2: The Wailing Women, Cave no.1, Early 6th century

Usually the feminine attire consists of three pieces, a light bodice, over which is worn a tunic of pleasing design, slit for almost the entire length at the sides to give freedom of movement and incidentally exposing the waist and a skirt or sari clinging close to the body and revealing the figure.⁶ Royal ladies are often painted wearing transparent clothes. Maids and other woman are painted in comparatively opaque material. Wherever they painted woman, an aspect of beauty is present there. Women are not painted as a centre of attraction or physical charm but as an embodiment of divinity, affection, compassion, inspiration and power. In spite of the half nude postures or transparent clothes of women in the paintings of Ajanta, obscenity is not felt while seeing the paintings even by a normal viewer. Dignity of women is maintained everywhere in the paintings. At many places love making couples are also painted but vulgarity can't be seen whereas a feel of union of souls can be seen. The artists have shown their efficiency in painting woman in Ajanta. Here the paintings of women haven't got voice, their gestures, postures and actions clearly manifest the whole story. In the paintings of women in Ajanta, the artists have given more importance to spirituality than sensuality. Some scholars believe that it's only the beauty of graceful lines that hides the obscenity in the portrayal of woman in the paintings of Ajanta.

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