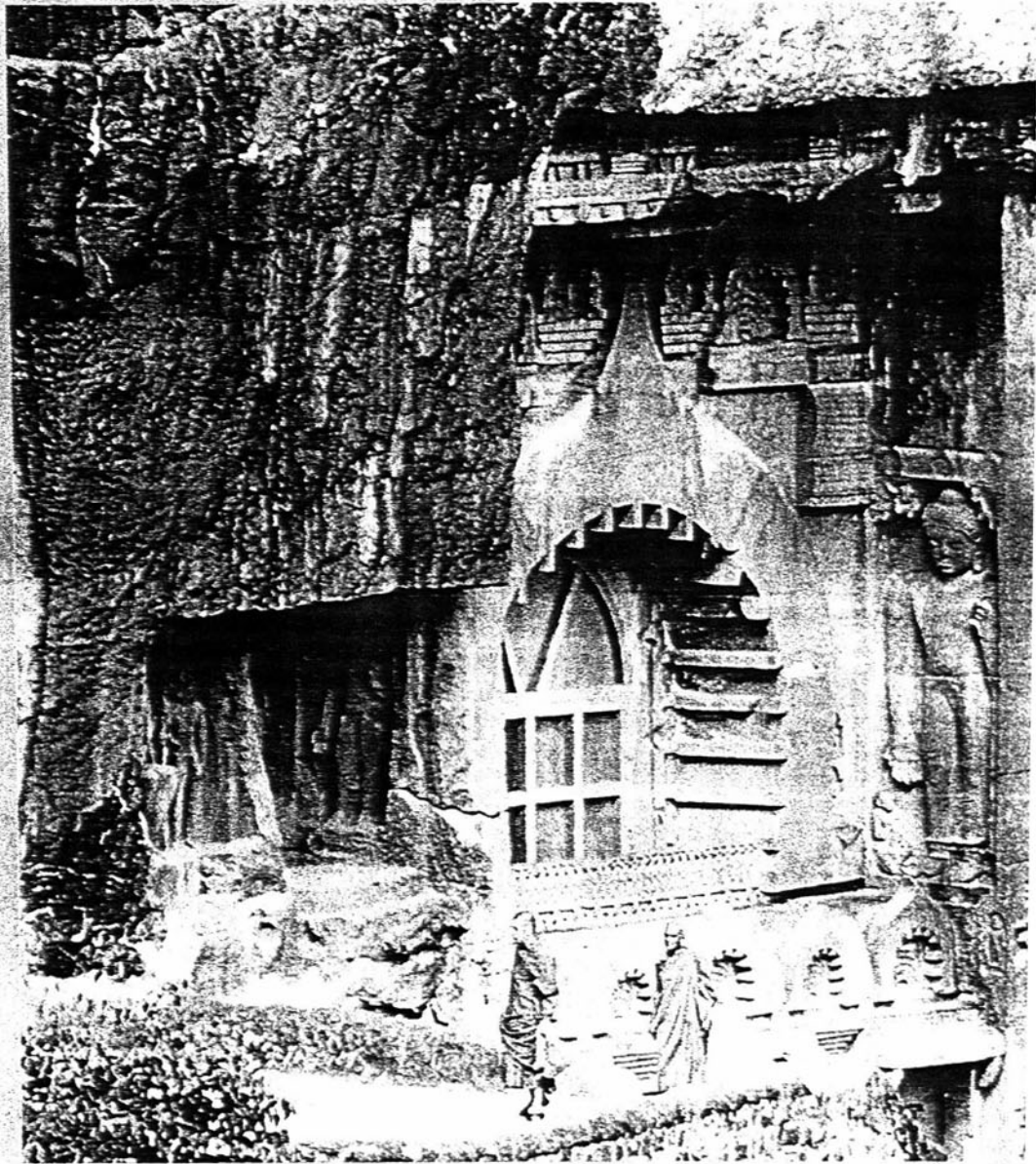
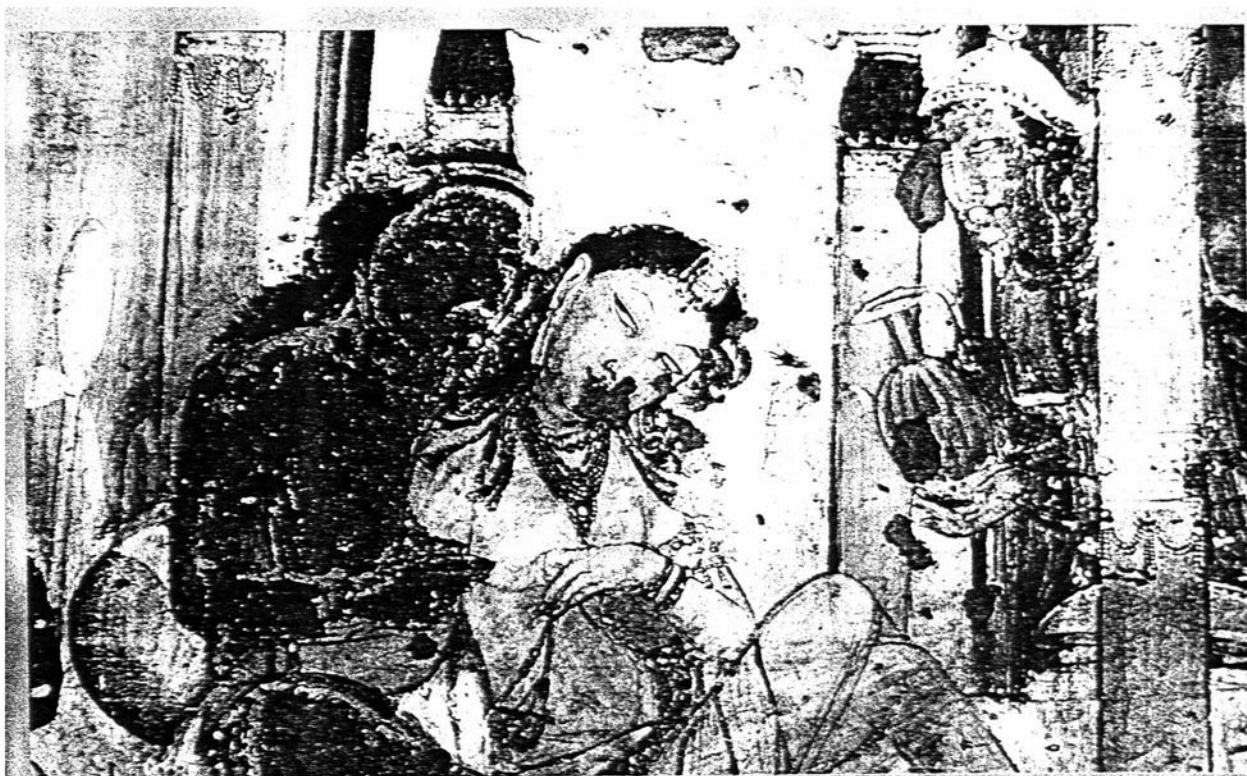


# AESTHETIC PUNCTUATIONS OF AJANTA FRESCOES

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(above)  
Cave No. 17, a depiction of the *Visvantara Jataka*. Prince Visvantara and Princess Madri seen with an attendant serving wine.

**Ajanta, one of the world's best known heritage monuments, has been frequently written about, and yet still inspires new research. This is a look at the Ajanta caves as monuments to compassion and artistic perfection.**

Huien Tsang wrote in the seventh century AD, about the Ajanta caves, "In the east of this country, Mohalachi'a (Maharashtra) was a mountain range, ridges are above another in succession, tiers of peaks and sheer summits. Here was a monastery, the base of which was in dark defile and its lofty halls and deep chambers were quarried in the cliff and... faced the ravine. The monastery had been built by A-Che-lo of western India. Within the establishment was a large temple above 100ft in height in which was a stone image of the Buddha

which was 70ft in height. The image was surmounted by tiers of seven canopies unattached and unsupported, each canopy separated from the one above... the walls of this temple had depicted on them, the incidents of Buddha's, bodhi and small omens attending all great and small were here delineated..." This is one of the earliest descriptions of the Ajanta caves. However this world heritage monument was accidentally rediscovered by the Madras Army in 1819 and the initial works were carried out by archaeologist, James Burgess and Major William Gill, who subsequently exhibited their work in 1866. Since then much has been written on Ajanta and volumes of reports and monographs have surfaced over the century. It would make sense therefore, only to touch upon the aesthetic punctuations of the Ajanta

Frescoes to refresh some lost memories.

The Ajanta caves are the most powerful combination of paintings, architecture, and sculptures, that were created between 100 B.C. and 600 A.D. Once a Buddhist monastic centre, the Ajanta caves were sculpted in imitation of structural prototypes. The doors, windows, columns and walls of the rock cut caves were adorned with carved and painted figures. The site is a key to the understanding of the development of Buddhist art. The caves contain traditional Buddhist motifs of Hinayana and Mahayana origins, which occur here at Ajanta for the first time. The Ajanta caves became the canvas for recording the development of not only Buddhist art but also the moral and philosophical perspectives of Buddhism. These caves embodied the golden age of

the Gupta period which was said to have raised Indian aesthetics to new heights.

At Ajanta, the rough surface of the rock wall was first covered with a layer of earth or cow dung mixed with chopped straw or animal hair to a thickness of an inch or an inch and a half. When this surface was ready, the actual painting was made on it. A fresco in its true sense, implies the application of colours to a layer of moist lime plaster. All other Indian and Asian murals were painted on dry walls.

The canvas for Ajanta painters was wide open, and not restricted, as in the case of the Sanchi, Bharut and Amravati sculptures. Continuation of the painting, even when the wall breaks up at right angles with an adjoining wall, maintains the interconnection between themes and also between paintings belonging to different periods. On this wide unrestricted wall or canvas, the painter worked out a variety of arrangements, mainly in horizontal bands, sometimes using wavy lines. The movement of themes ran from left to right and also from right to left. The paintings appear overwhelming due to their close proximity to the viewers.

Cave no. X at Ajanta is said to be the oldest and dates back to the 1st century AD, depicting the *Jataka* stories or anecdotes about the previous births of Buddha before attaining *nirvana*. The paintings are arranged in the form of a long frieze and different themes are linked with different frames. However, in some frames the Bodhisattva plays the axis and is encircled with various motifs without the classical harmonising element. The motif and decoration are so placed in relation to each other that one moves on from one detail to another in an interrelated fashion, without compromising on the axis of prominence.

The composition is generally confined to a single band of depiction though in the later years painting overspreads the entire surface of the rock wall. Benjamin Rowland wrote "These paintings overspread the entire surface with human beings in the enactment of the Indian Aesop's fables, having the same sense of teeming life and vitality that we encounter in the densely crowded reliefs of the famous gateways of Sanchi"

The 'eye' of human compassion in all the compositions is almost universal and motifs like human beings in relation to animals are depicted without losing their balance of character. Ornamentation with the border hemming made out of a design of flower and foliage are a unique copy-book of the ancient aesthetic dictum.

The famous depiction of the queen in her palace (cave I) is a unique example of *lavanya* or grace which is one of the six elements of art mentioned in the *Kama Sutra*. In this composition, one finds the lyrical eyes looking downward with compassion. Though the painting is faded, yet the highlights and shades stand out prominently. Jewels and ornamentations from the necklace to the arm-band are prominently placed without undermining the flow and movement of the gesture. The contrast becomes apparent when this posture is compared of that with Indra and his celestial nymphs in the cave XVII. Though both are 'graceful', the colour of tempera changes rapidly. The figure of Indra is given a sense of movement with the puffing of air, using shades of white and blue. The detail of ornaments are given a secondary treatment, the *bhava* of compassion never being lost. The gorgeousness of ornamentation is further apparent in the portrayal of Bodhisattava Vajrapani, the bearer of the thunderbolt, seen in his headdress. Amidst the embellishment, the Buddhist symbolism is ever present.

One of the most potent frames that emphasises the pathos of sacrifice is seen in Cave I. Bodhisattava King Mahajanaka announces his decision to renounce the world, despite his queen's efforts to change his mind, leaving her distraught. The royal setting with women playing flutes complete the composition. So true to life are the paintings that the pearls on the armband of the flautist sway with the music.

Cave XVII has a depiction of the *Jataka* *Visvavantra*. Here Prince Visvavantra is seen with Queen Madri are seen in the palace garden with attendants serving wine. The tree with a powerful stem and longish leaves are in relief. But the window, from where two women peep, makes it an interesting picture. The intricacy of any character is not neglected, but again the queen with her standing posture becomes an axis.

This is its uniqueness, as none of the character is diluted to enhance one depiction. Interaction with other countries such as Persia is apparent in the apparel of the women pouring wine-dispenser.

Eyes of various characters shown in the fresco are a unique feature of Ajanta. The eyes of the princess, the kings and other celestial creatures are drawn with wavy eye-lids reflecting a deep meditative nature which depicts the sublime look of grace and compassion. Similarly, the eyes of the beggars (Cave XVII) are 'soothing' but also have an element of pain and suffering retained in them. In the same cave is a Brahman receiving 'alms'. He is shown with anxious eyes. The same cave shows the eyes of the maid with an 'element' of action in them. The essence of resemblance, being true to the mind and nature stood out prominently in those fresco.

The caves depict much more than Buddhist legends, they are portrayals of a way of life.

Ajanta stands as testimony to the skill of early medieval *chitrakaars* who painted frescos that are still so alive and poignant, and archaic yet contemporary. ■

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