

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

INDIAN CULTURE- Visual Arts

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Overview

The three premier visual arts of India are architecture, sculpture and painting. The first two, using the same or similar materials, developed together, and all three are sometimes found combined in a single structure, such as a temple. Historically, all three art forms served religious and ritual purposes (Hindu, Buddhist and Jain), although only architecture has been guided by canonical texts (*sastras*). While these three visual arts are regarded as grounded in classical Indian tradition, each one bears evidence of significance external influences, largely from Greece, Persia OR Europe. And yet, most buildings, figures and images display a plasticity and earthbound sensuality that is identifiably 'Indian.'

Architecture

Buddhist The earliest examples of Indian architecture are Buddhist structures from the 3rd c. BCE. The chief architectural monument of this and later periods was the *stupa*, which was essentially a funeral mound housing the relics of the Buddha. The oldest and most elaborate stupa at Sanchi is 16 metres high and 37 metres in diameter. Four gateways were added about 100 CE and then decorated with scenes of the Buddha's life. Ashoka's palace at Pataliputra, as well as pillars and columns inscribed with his edicts, suggest that they were influenced by Persian models of the Achaemenid Empire. Stupas, halls (*caitya*) and monasteries (*viraha*) were carved out of rock caves at Ajanta and Ellora in the early centuries of the Christian era. Free-standing structures came somewhat later, notably the hall at Bodh Gaya (6th-7th c. CE) and the monastery at Nalanda (9th c. CE).

Hindu Following Buddhist models, the first Hindu temples were cut from caves (at Badami) or monolithic rock (at Mahabalipuram) in the middle of the first millennium CE. Free-standing temples developed at the same time, although they were built according to conventions and principles laid down in texts (*sastras*), the most important being that the overall design was a symbolic representation of the universe. By about 1000 CE, temples were built as large interior spaces surrounded by fortress-like walls with high, sculpted towers. Distinct styles developed in every region of the country, leading to an elaboration of porches, columns, doorways, ceilings and passageways that define the baroque temples of south India in the 16th-18th c. CE.

Islamic From about 1200 CE, Muslim rulers in north India supported architectural forms, such as the mosque, tomb, garden and mausoleum. The distinguishing features of this architecture are the dome, arches, vaults and calligraphy, which derive from architecture in central Asia, especially the Timurid Empire. A unique structure, built in 1192 CE, is the Qutb Minar in Delhi, which at 73 metres is the tallest brick minaret in the world. Later regional styles developed in the Deccan, as seen in the mosque at Gulbarga and tombs at Golconda. Even these impressive buildings were surpassed during the Mughal period by the Jami Masqid at Delhi and the Taj Mahal at Agra.

European Portuguese baroque churches were built all along the west coast of India in the 16th and 17th centuries. In the 18th century, the British began to build more chaste churches, massive civic buildings and palatial homes. In the early twentieth century, an English architect designed New Delhi as a series of large roundabouts and wide avenues leading to a complex of government buildings that synthesise Hindu, Muslim and European features in a new imperial style.

Sculpture

Early Stone and bronze figures from the Indus Valley civilisation (third millennium BCE) are early examples of the graceful and naturalistic modelling that define Indian sculpture through the ages. However, two thousand years passed before pieces of a similar quality were produced in the carved stone pillars of the Mauryan Empire. A magnificent lion, atop one pillar, is now the national emblem of India. Characteristic iconography includes the lotus flower, water symbols and the gestures and poses of the historical Buddha. Outstanding examples are found in north and central India at Sanchi, Ellora and Ajanta, but perhaps the most spectacular is in south India at Amaravati, where the carved figures display skill, dynamism and imagination.

Shift In the early centuries of the Common Era sculpture shifted from symbols and narrative scenes to individual figures. Earlier iconography, consistent with Buddhist ideas of impermanence and non-existence of the soul, was aniconic, using only an empty throne, Bodhi tree or the wheel of life to represent the Buddha. Now, however, the Buddha began to appear in anthropomorphic form alongside other figures, such as deities and nymphs.

Gupta The Gupta Empire (4th-6th c. CE) produced the classical school of Indian sculpture, characterised by supreme plasticity, graceful lines and sensual yet serene surfaces. A good illustration is the red sandstone standing image of the Buddha from Mathura, wearing a diaphanous robe with delicately carved folds. Similar softly moulded figures of the Indian pantheon were the inspiration for Hindu and Buddhist art produced in Southeast Asia, China and Japan.

South India About 600 CE, a parallel classical school of sculpture emerged in south India, illustrated by the rock-cut and free-standing temples at Mahabalipuram. More elaborate stone sculpting of Hindu gods and goddesses is seen at Kanchipuram, while bronze casting achieved a high level of sophistication during the Chola Empire (9-13th c. CE). Most observers comment on the assured skill of the Chola artisans, the simple perfection of the bodies, their life-like pose yet other-worldly detachment. One well-known masterpiece is the image of Siva as the 'Lord of the Dance.'

Modern During the modern period, deities have been joined by secular figures as subjects of public representation in stone. A statue of Lord Cornwallis, Governor of Madras, was erected in 1800, followed by at least 200 sculptures of other Europeans. Since Independence, however, almost every city and town has public statues of Indians. Gandhi is the most common choice, but film stars, political leaders, legendary heroines and 'heroes of labour' also stand up for public viewing.

Painting

Wall Painting The earliest surviving examples of painting in India are the cave wall-paintings at Bhimbetka (c. 40,000-30,000 BCE). More sophisticated are the frescoes in the rock-cut caves of Ajanta and Ellora painted from about 500–1000 CE, which depict Buddhist and Hindu gods and goddesses.

Manuscripts Painting on palm-leaf manuscripts and their wooden covers represents a transition from wall-painting to miniature painting. The earliest surviving examples, which come from the 11th-12th c. CE, show tiny Buddhist images, which were thought to protect the words in the manuscript and provide the reader with spiritual insight.

Indo-Islamic Muslim rulers during the Delhi Sultanate (c. 1200-1500 CE) patronised Persian and Central Asian culture, especially a style of painting characterised by group scenes and bright colours. Another innovation in this period was paper, which led to the painted book, enabling larger spaces to be painted (compared with earlier palm-leaf and bark manuscripts) and encouraging complex scenes and decorative schemes.

Bhakti The Hindu tradition of illustrated manuscripts flourished as part of the *bhakti* (devotionalist) movement that dominated north India from the 15th century CE onward. Krishna and Radha, in particular, are wonderfully rendered on manuscripts of the *Bhagavata Purana*, and a whole new genre of painting (*ragamala*) appeared, in which specific images symbolised musical modes.

Mughal During the Mughal Empire (16-19th c. CE), book-painting superseded wall-painting as the favoured form and eventually developed into a visual art altogether separate from a manuscript or book. The names of individual artists were also recorded, and by the 19th century the Mughal miniature was appreciated as an aesthetic object in its own right, bought by connoisseurs in London, Paris and New York. These changes were largely engineered by the eclectic genius of Akbar (1556-1605 CE), who assembled a large contingent of artists from all over his empire and put them under the instruction of a Persian master-painter, supervised by himself.

Modern In the 19th century, Indian painters were commissioned by British patrons to produce scenes of local life known as 'Company paintings.' By the end of the century, art schools had been established in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, and at least one raja (Raja Ravi Varma of Travancore) had created his own synthesis of western and Indian painting. In the 20th century, painting sought to find a place within the politics of cultural nationalism. For example, Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941) was inspired by the Ajanta and Ellora caves, though her paintings were rendered in a modernist idiom.

Discussion/questions

1. Analyse the historical development of Indian painting by focusing on the material surface. How did cave walls, palm-leaf, bark, cloth and paper influence the finished art work? What is a fresco? And how did that technique affect the history of painting in India?
2. The history of Indian architecture contains four main strands: Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic and European. Analyse the interaction of these four strands by focusing on one architectural form for each: the Buddhist stupa, the free-standing Hindu temple, the Islamic tomb garden and the Christian church. There are obvious differences in form, but consider also any similarities in function. Can all of them, for example, be seen as funerary structures?
3. The architectural history of Delhi may be seen as a microcosm of much of Indian history. Evaluate this statement by correlating important events of Indian history with architectural monuments in the city. It is important that both Old and New Delhi were built by foreign conquerors?
4. Carved stone images of Hindu gods and goddesses dominate the history of Indian sculpture. Analyse their cultural and religious function, paying attention to their creators, patrons and audiences. Consider also that Hindus, unlike animists, do not believe that the deity resides in the stone; rather, it requires a ritual specialist to invoke the divine.
5. South Indian bronzes produced during the Chola Empire are considered by many art historians to be among the finest pieces of all Indian art. These bronzes are further admired for the 'lost wax' method used to make them. Analyse the history of this art form. Why did it appear in the 9th to 12th centuries CE in the Chola country? How did the artisans learn and adopt the lost wax method?

Reading

Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple* (Calcutta, 1946)

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Catherine Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India* (Cambridge, 1992)

George Michell and Mark Zebrowski, *Architecture and Art of the Deccan Sultanates* (Cambridge, 1999)

Milo Cleveland Beach, *Mughal and Rajput Painting* (Cambridge, 1992)

Partha Mitter, *Indian Art* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 168-239

Vidya Deheja, *Early Buddhist Rock Temples* (Cornell 1972)

C. Sivaramamurthi, *Indian Sculpture* (Allied, 1982)

Pratapradya Pal, *Indian Sculpture* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1988)

P. Chandra, *The Sculpture of India 3000 B.C.–1300 A.D* (Harvard, 1985)