

INDIAN ART – Postclassical Period

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Early Postclassical Period

Architecture The rock-cut temples, stupas and prayer-halls at Ellora (c. 600-1000 CE) represent a continuation of those same Hindu and Buddhist structures carved earlier at Ajanta, in the same region of western India. In particular, the Kailasanatha temple at Ellora dedicated to Siva is impressive. It was carved out a single rock face, starting from the top and working down. It has a courtyard, a tower, a central shrine, five minor shrines and a columned arcade three stories high with alcoves and sculpted panels. Soon these rock-cave structures gave way to free-standing ones, although both rock-cut and free-standing temples are seen at Mahabalipuram (c. 700 CE). Free-standing temples were built according to conventions laid down in canonical texts (*sastras*), the most important being that the overall design was a symbolic representation of the universe. Temples were largely built with stone, although brick and mortar continued to be used in areas where stone was not readily available. The earliest (and still magnificent) temples were built in the 6th century CE at Aihole and Badami in the Deccan. By the end of the period, several other distinct regional styles had developed, in the far south (Tamil Nadu), on the west coast (Kerala), on the east coast (Orissa) and in Bengal. Late Buddhist architecture is represented by the great monastery at Nalanda (9th c. CE) and the hall at Bodh Gaya (6th-7th c. CE).

Sculpture Outstanding examples of early Hindu sculpture are seen on both the rock-cut and free-standing temples at Mahabalipuram and the caves at Ajanta and Ellora. Further developments in stone sculpting of Hindu gods and goddesses are seen on the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram, the Pallava capital, not far from Madras. The 'lost wax' method of bronze casting had been known in the Indus Valley Civilisation (3rd millennium BCE), but it reached perfection in the figures sculpted in South India at the end of this period. Artisans patronised by Chola kings produced bronze figures of deities and rulers with remarkable plasticity and subtlety.

Painting Continuity with the earlier tradition of wall painting is seen in the exquisite images depicted on the walls and ceilings of rock-cut temples at Ellora. Some of the most beautiful images are of graceful *apsaras*, female spirits of air and water in Indian mythology. Although the paintings have deteriorated, copies made by both hand and camera in the 19th century provide us with a good idea of their original beauty.

Late Postclassical Period

Indo-Islamic architecture The sultans of Delhi, and the minor Muslim rulers in the Deccan, oversaw the development of an Indo-Islamic style of architecture characterised by ornate and intricately designed arches and domes. Pillars, mosques and tombs were decorated with floral patterns and calligraphic inscriptions from the Qur'an. The royal tombs of the Lodi Sultans are an excellent illustration of this style. The most famous structure, however, is the Qutub Minar, a pillar standing 73 metres high at the centre of a large complex of buildings, including tombs and mosques on the outskirts of Delhi. Made of brick but covered with metal, and later enlarged by adding six storeys made of sandstone and marble, the Qutub Minar is an architectural metaphor for the Sultanate as a whole. Begun in 1192, it was struck by lightning, damaged by an earthquake, repaired and added to throughout the period, reaching its present condition in the early 16th century.

Hindu architecture Some of the most magnificent Hindu temples in India were also built in the early centuries of this period. Regional styles evolved in Bengal, Kerala and Orissa, but the most spectacular temples were constructed in the far south. A large open space, often with a pool of water, was enclosed by a square, with high towers on each of four walls. Outstanding examples are the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram and the Brihadishvara temple at Tanjore, both in modern-day Tamil Nadu.

Sculpture The quality of sculpture in north India declined during the Sultanate and produced a predominance of massive, rigid forms. However, a subtle school of bronze sculpture developed in eastern India, as seen in the images of Buddhist gods and goddesses at Nalanda and Kurkihar. In the south, the tradition of exquisite Chola bronzes (made with the 'lost-wax' method) continued to produce excellent pieces.

Readings

Philip Davies, *The Penguin Guide to the Monuments of India: Islamic, Rajput, European* (Penguin, 1990)

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Joan Cummins, *Indian painting: from Cave Temples to the Colonial Period* (Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 2006)

B.N. Goswamy, *The Spirit of Indian Painting* (Allen Lane, 2015)