

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

INDIAN ART

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Overview The visual arts have a long and rich history in India, beginning with exquisite rock paintings in prehistory and culminating in the Mughal miniatures in the early modern period. Subtle representations of the human figure are also seen in sculpture, while architecture displays grand design and vision. All three traditional art forms (painting, sculpture and architecture) underwent significant change in the colonial era, and only painting has survived that encounter with modernity with any trace of its history.

Prehistory

Rock art The earliest examples of visual art in the subcontinent are rock paintings and rock inscriptions (petroglyphs). More than 150 sites with this kind of artwork have been located, the earliest dating from approximately 40,000 BCE, with the majority from 15,000 to 5,000 BCE. Rock inscriptions, especially those found at Edakkal (modern-day Kerala and dated to 6000 BCE), show human and animal figures with a distinct resemblance to those of the later Indus Valley civilisation.

Bhimbetka paintings The rock paintings at Bhimbetka (modern Madhya Pradesh) are one of the largest known collections of stone-age art in the world. The 243 caves there form part of a group of about 750 rock shelters in this part of central India. The remarkable feature of the painting in the Bhimbetka caves is that it extends from roughly 40,000-30,000 BCE up to the first millennium CE. Even more significantly, the paintings depict many elements of culture that can be seen among tribes in the area today.

Technique Sixteen different colours were used at Bhimbetka, made from minerals and mixed with water, animal fat, animal marrow or egg whites. A pale white, made from limestone, and a dark red, made from iron oxide, are the dominant colours. Archaeologists assume that the brushes (which have not survived) were made of twigs and animal hairs.

Animal images Twenty-nine different animal species are depicted at Bhimbetka, including bison, tigers, panthers, antelopes, elephants, lions and rhinoceroses (the last three are no longer found in the area). It is noteworthy that no snakes of any kind are painted at Bhimbetka or any other stone-age site in India.

Human images Human figures (men, women and children) are drawn stick-like, many wearing necklaces, knee bands, wrist bands and bangles. Some carry spears or bow and arrows (although the extent of the use of these weapons is a matter of debate). There are also several scenes of humans dancing in a circle with linked hands. The men wear loin cloths, the women wear their hair braided. Some dancers wear masks and may be ritual specialists.

Indus Valley Civilisation

Workmanship In a civilisation of long duration, vast territory and monumental buildings, we might expect to find art and architecture on a monumental scale. In fact, the art of the IVC is characterised by small-scale elegance. IVC people created visual images by painting and incising them on a variety of surfaces, as well as by shaping them into three-dimensional forms. Most observers comment on the skilled workmanship of these craftsmen, who worked on such a small-scale and displayed such control of their medium. The incised steatite seals, for example, range in size from ½ x ½ inch to 2.5 x 2.5 inches. Yet on these tiny surfaces, using a few deft strokes, artisans managed to depict anatomically convincing animals, detailed urns and flowering trees.

Figurines The three-dimensional representations of humans and animals are mostly terracotta (unglazed fired clay), although we also have a few notable statues of stone and bronze (see examples noted below). Some of the terracotta pieces are no larger than a thumb. Many are goddesses with elaborate headdresses and ornaments, such as belts and bangles, some of which are painted. Others figurines are of animals—water buffalo, deer, ram, rhinoceros, elephant, monkey, bear, rabbit, dog and zebu (humped cattle)—as well as birds and fish.

Dancing girl One of the standout objects of IVC art is a bronze statuette of a dancing girl. Its fine workmanship, especially in the modelling of the body with sinewy curves, is impressive. When it was discovered and first shown, in the 1920s, archaeologists doubted that it came from the Indus valley and suggested that it must have been made much later in the classical period. When the early date was confirmed, scholars then began to wonder if somehow Greek art had been influenced by the Indus artists.

Bearded man Another impressive art piece from the IVC is the bust of a so-called ‘bearded man’ or ‘priest-king.’ Made of soapstone and 18 cm tall, it was found in a wall-niche of a building with ornamental brickwork. His beard and upper lip are closely shaved, he has pierced earlobes and he seems to wear an elaborate hairstyle, though this is partially obscured. He also wears an armband and a cloak or shawl with an elaborate pattern of circles.

Fish bowl Among the thousands of terracotta works, we can point to a bowl to illustrate the imagination and skill of potters in the IVC. This shallow container (4 cm high, 23 cm in diameter at the top and 10 cm at the base) has been painted grey and black with a dazzling pattern of fish. Three fish swim counter-clockwise in one panel while two others travel in the opposite direction just below them. The black wavy line on the lip gives the impression that what we see below is water.

Classical Period

Architecture The chief architectural monument of the early period was the stupa. Essentially funeral mounds housing the relics of the Buddha, stupas were first built in the reign of Ashoka (3rd c. BCE). As such, they are the oldest surviving religious structures in India. The earliest and most elaborate stupa is that at Sanchi, which measures 16 metres high and 37 metres in diameter. Its hemispherical frame is made of brick, but the four gateways, added about 100 CE and decorated with fine sculptures of the Buddha’s life, are carved from sandstone.

Ajanta and Ellora Stupas, prayer-halls and monasteries were also carved out of rock caves at Ajanta and Ellora in western India (c. 200 BCE to 300 CE). Monasteries (*vihara*) were multi-storied structures containing kitchens, sleeping quarters and niches. The prayer-halls (*caitya*) were large spaces in which worshippers could gather, and most also contained a stupa. Some prayer-halls were built with wood, evidenced by a vault supported by horseshoe-shaped ribs, but only the rock-hewn examples survive.

Painting The ceilings and walls of these religious spaces in caves were painted with murals showing Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina figures and scenes from religious texts, especially the Buddhist *Jataka* stories. The paintings were done in ‘dry fresco’ style: painted on top of a dry plaster surface rather than onto wet plaster. These paintings—luxurious, sensual and ethereal—are considered by many to be the highpoint of Indian painting.

Sculpture A school of sculpture emerged that depicted scenes and figures from the life of the Buddha and the *Jataka* tales. Its characteristic features included the lotus flower, water symbols and the gestures and physical poses of the historical Buddha. Outstanding examples are found in north and western India at Sanchi, Ellora and Ajanta, but perhaps the most spectacular is found in south India at Amaravati. These exquisitely carved figures, often in narrative scenes and in small niches, display a skill, dynamism and imagination unseen in most later Indian sculpture.

Gandhara At roughly the same time, the Gandhara (or Greco-Buddhist) style of sculpture developed in the northwest. This style is named after the region of Gandhara, where Persian, Greek, Scythian and Chinese cultures intermingled. Artisans here were inspired by Mahayana Buddhism, patronised by the Kushana king Kanishka and influenced by Greek models. They produced large, muscular representations of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas (particularly Maitreya), who resemble Greek figures wearing a Roman toga.

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.

Early Modern Period

Architecture The Mughals further developed the tradition of Indo-Islamic architecture that they inherited from the Delhi Sultanate. The Mughals retained the ornate arches and domes, but their buildings tended to be symmetrical, large enclosed spaces, like Hindu temples. Crucially, they also added a garden, itself laid out in a square grid pattern. The most perfect example of the tomb garden is the Taj Mahal, built for the wife of the Emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1658). Other typical structures are the Friday mosques (Jami Masjid) of red sandstone and white marble that were constructed in Delhi, Lucknow, Lahore, Fatehpur Sikri and Agra. The Red Fort, also in Delhi and also built by Shah Jahan, is another impressive structure. Although it is slightly asymmetrical, in order to incorporate an older fort on the same site, this massive sandstone complex was the political and symbolic centre of the Mughal Empire.

Regional styles Regional styles of Indo-Islamic architecture also evolved in the smaller Muslim kingdoms in the Deccan. In particular, the domed tombs at Golconda are spectacular. Built by the Qutb Shahi rulers in the 16th and 17th centuries CE, and furnished with carpets and chandeliers, these now abandoned mausoleums stand as symbols of a past glory. Hindu temples also became more elaborate, adding porches, columns, doorways, ceilings and passageways. The domes, niches and arches of some temples (e.g., the Govindadeva temple in Mathura) show clear Indo-Islamic influence. On the other hand, some of the most spectacular buildings are the temples and palaces constructed in the far south, at Madurai, Trivandrum and Padmanabhapuram (all 16th-18th c. CE).

Painting The Mughal rulers brought significant changes to Indian painting. From the 16th century onward, book-painting superseded wall-painting as the favoured form and then developed into a visual art altogether separate from manuscripts and books. In another departure from tradition, the names of individual artists were recorded. Once again, Emperor Akbar was instrumental in these developments. He assembled a large contingent of artists from all over his empire and put them under the instruction of a Persian master-painter, whom he supervised. Later Mughal emperors continued to patronise 'miniature' painting, as did local rulers in the Deccan and Rajasthan. The Hindu tradition of illustrated manuscripts flourished as part of the devotionalist movement that developed in north India. Krishna and Radha are wonderfully rendered on manuscripts of the *Bhagavata Purana*, and a new genre of painting appeared, in which a series of images symbolised musical modes.

Music The two schools of 'classical' Indian music both emerged at the end of the early modern era. Although most Hindustani (north Indian) musicians today trace their lineage from Tansen, the great vocalist and instrumentalist at Akbar's court, the style of singing known as *khyal* and the modern style of playing the *sitar* developed in the 18th century. The south Indian tradition of Carnatic music derives from the Maratha court at Tanjore, where three men composed the repertoire that defines the tradition today: Syama Sastry (1762-1827), Tyagaraja (1767-1847) and Muttuswami Dikshitar (1775-1835).

19th Century

Architecture Although Hindu and Islamic architecture continued with the trends set in the early modern period, the 19th century was the grand era of colonial, mostly British, architecture. Libraries, museums, universities, law courts, railway terminals and government buildings were all erected with massive dimensions as a visual display of power. Most were designed in the neo-classical style, such as the Government House in Calcutta. Toward the end of the century, European architects in India began to build in the Indo-Saracenic style, which combined features of Victorian Gothic with Mughal architecture. Mughal architecture was preferred to Hindu architecture because its domes and arches were considered more compatible with European building methods than were the post- and-beam structure of Hindu temples. The Napier Museum in Trivandrum (1880) and the Taj Hotel in Bombay (1903) are both fine examples of this composite style.

Painting While court painting declined from the mid-19th century onward, painting traditions at the local level maintained their vitality. Painted cloth scrolls depicting mythological scenes were (and in some cases are still) used as a backdrop to storytelling traditions in Bengal, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. One of these cloth-painting traditions became a commercial success in the Kalighat district of Calcutta. Local folk artists produced these paintings and then sold them to the pilgrims who came to the temples and shrines in the area, eventually attracting interest from Europeans and Bengali elites. By the early 20th century, however, this popular visual art had been undermined by mass-produced wood-cuts and later by poster art. Indian painters were commissioned by British patrons to produce scenes of local life known as 'Company paintings.' British residents and travellers also painted and drew aspects of Indian society and landscapes, notably the works by Thomas and William Daniell. By the end of the century, art schools had been established in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. Raja Ravi Varma of Travancore (1848-1906) is thought to be the first Indian to adapt western techniques of perspective and composition to Indian content in painting. He chose traditional Indian scenes and figures from both real-life and mythology. Toward the end of his life, he set up a lithographic press that mass-produced his paintings and made them available to people who could not otherwise afford them. This technology of reproduction then led to an explosion of popular visual culture in the next century.

20th Century

Architecture In the 1920s, New Delhi was built as the new capital of British India by the English architect Lutyens. His new city was laid out in a symmetrical design with large roundabouts and wide avenues leading to a complex of government buildings. These buildings synthesise Hindu, Muslim and European features in a new imperial subcontinental style. Foreign influences continued to affect large scale building after Independence, especially in the work of the Frenchman Le Corbusier and the Indian Correa. In the 1950s, at Nehru's bidding, Le Corbusier built the city of Chandigarh, the capital of the new state of Punjab. In the following decade, Correa, having returned from studying in the US, began to experiment with his unique blend of traditional Indian and modern features. Following his memorial to Gandhi in Ahmedabad, he went on to build high-rise apartments in Bombay and public buildings in Bhopal and Jaipur. His buildings, especially the arts centre in Jaipur, are widely praised as a successful blend of spirituality and functionality.

Painting In the early decades, painting sought to find a place within the politics of cultural nationalism. The oil paintings of the half-Hungarian and Paris-trained Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941) were inspired by the Ajanta and Ellora caves. But her paintings were rendered in a modernist idiom and were hailed as a new artistic awakening. Later Indian painters of this period attempted to combine Indian decorativism and western naturalism. A good example was M.F. Husain (1915-2011), an eccentric and controversial artist who never maintained a studio, painted Hindu deities in the nude and owned a collection of vintage sports cars. For his synthesis, he borrowed the techniques of Cezanne and Matisse to paint scenes from the Hindu epics and myths. Another distinctive figure was Bhupen Khakhar (1934-2004), who drew inspiration from a variety of sources, both Indian and western. His openly homosexual themes were autobiographical and created controversy. However, his skill, particularly in rendering colour on flat surfaces, has earned his work a place in major museums around the world.

Discussion/Questions

1. Compare the rock paintings in India with their more famous counterparts in Spain and France. What differences are apparent, and what might those differences suggest about the societies that painted them?
2. The workmanship of representational art in the Indus Valley civilisation is of high quality, especially in the small figurines. Famous examples include the 'dancing girl' and the 'bearded man.' Somewhat overlooked are the pieces that include decorative features, such as the shallow bowl with a wavy fish pattern. What is the history of decorative art in India and what does its relatively minor status suggest about wider cultural patterns?
3. Early Buddhist art (c. 300 BCE-300 CE) contains some of the finest examples of visual representation anywhere in the world. The earliest pieces, however, are aniconic. That is, they do not show the figure of the Buddha. This aniconism was consistent with the extreme austerity of the early Buddhist tradition. Within two centuries this changed, and artists created delicate, sensual representations of the Buddha and other figures. What can account for this shift in thinking and practice?
4. The splendours of Indo-Islamic architecture are well known. At the core of these magnificent structures is the garden tomb, a borrowing from Persian tradition. The history of gardens in India would begin here and would reveal a new dimension to Indian culture.
5. Mughal miniature paintings are among the most admired painting traditions in the world. However, it is not always appreciated that they began essentially as illustrations in manuscripts. Slowly, however, the paintings became an art in their own right, separated from the texts and with the artists' signature. What accounts for this radical shift? Was it the beginning of modernity in India?
6. Study the Company paintings (by William Daniell and others) done in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. To what extent can we 'read' them as a visual representation of the wider political and economic collaboration between Europe and India?
7. Modern painting is an excellent window on the tricky synthesis of tradition and modernity in Indian culture more generally. A study of a handful of the acknowledged masters of painting since 1950 (M.F. Hussain, Amrita Sher-Gil, Bhupen Khakar, Jamini Roy, F.N. Souza) would be an original contribution to the analysis of contemporary Indian culture.

Reading

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