

INDIAN ART – Ancient Period

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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.