



Journal for Social
Science Archives

Journal for Social Science Archives

Online ISSN: 3006-3310

Print ISSN: 3006-3302

Volume 4, Number 1, 2026, Pages 175 – 186

Journal Home Page

<https://jssarchives.com/index.php/Journal/about>



The Sacred Feminine in Early Indian Art: A Case Study of Proportion and Iconography at Ajanta

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: November 15, 2025
Revised: December 20, 2025
Accepted: January 03, 2026
Available Online: January 14, 2026

Keywords:

iconography, Ajanta, Kushan, eroticism, Tribhanga, Sanchi, Gupta, Mahayana.

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the idealized female figures in the Ajanta murals through a combined study of proportion, iconography, and visual convention. It argues that the artists follow codified aesthetic canons, such as the seven-headed proportional system, regulations of ratios for the facial and thoracic proportions, and the Tribhanga posture, rather than a naturalistic depiction. The textual authorities, such as the Vishnudharmottara Purana, follow the path of feminine iconography development through the aniconic Bharhut and Sanchi stupa forms, the Kushan and Gupta innovations, to the Mahayana peak of iconography at Ajanta. The paper challenges modern interpretations that conflate the nudity of women at Ajanta with references to deity or heavenly figures, fertility and approved standards of beauty and are more about sanctity than eroticism. The Cave 16 is focused around the mural of the Dying Princess, which is an example of such mastery of composition, curvilinear lines, and perspective depth with a strong sense of pathos. The paper emphasised that the Ajanta artist incorporated visual language for the cultural, proportional, and symbolic conventions to redefine the female figure as a spiritual and philosophical meaning.

Introduction

The Ajanta caves, which are found in the region of Aurangabad in Maharashtra, are also one of the most notable accomplishments of early Indian art since these caves combined the art of painting, sculpture, and rock-cut architecture. (Deshpande 1973) The female figure takes a very high place among all the wide variety of issues represented in the thirty excavated monuments, both thematically and visually. (Pratap 2016) Specifically, these images have been the focus of

continuing scholarly interest, because of their unique proportions, including head rarely being used on a body, the face, which occupies a third of total height, and the thorax, which occupies two-thirds of total length, as well as stylistic treatment in its finesse, such as *tribhanga* pose and flowing, rhythmic lines, and cultural significance. (Lakshminarayanan 2024) Being long-armed, full-breasted, almond-shaped-eyed and swaying *Tribhanga* posed, the repeated perfect female shapes are open to critical examination of both artistic intent and perception by the viewers and the aesthetics of ancient South Asia. (Sharman n.d.) The subject of mythological imagery with long limbs, full breasts, almond-shaped eyes, and swaying *tribhanga* poses, with their repetition, vital critical questions about the intention of art, its perception, and aesthetic schemata of ancient South Asia.

In order to answer these questions, this paper will explore the principles of the development of female images in Ajanta, showing how artists strictly followed codified proportional canons contained in such texts as Vishnudharmottara Purana, which stipulated ideal forms of divine and celestial figures. It maintains that these statues are not only imagined as the depiction of the human form of beauty, but also as the personification of spiritual concepts, such as purity, fertility, and transcendence, reached through careful craft and not just artistic orthodoxy. Besides, the placement of Ajanta murals in the context of larger artistic trends, i.e., aniconic and symbolic female figures of Mauryan and Sunga stupas of the period Bharhut and Sanchi, Kushan yakshis and Gupta refinements, offers both the purposeful and rigorously followed course of the feminine iconographic development in ancient Indian art, showing the eventual movement toward educative aestheticism. (Kaur and Manju 2023) Across a horseshoe-shaped rocky hillock overlooking the river Waghora, this monastic complex created an isolated atmosphere that facilitated artistic and spiritual activities of the Buddhist monks. (Tripathi and Jain 2019) Besides, the paper touches upon the misunderstood connection between nudity and sanctity in the contemporary interpretation of the Ajanta images. Contrary to the eroticism, the nudity of ancient Indian aesthetic meant godly or heavenly, fertility and recommended standards of beauty as textual authorities and mural contexts agreed with the symbol of sanctity rather than sensuality. (Deshpande 1973) As illustrated in this study through elaborate stylistic examination and by a close case study of the mural in Ajanta cave 16 of the Dying Princess, which is a masterpiece of balance of technical perfection, emotional appeal and quasi-religious precepts, the artists of Ajanta created images of timeless expressive strength reviving Indian figural traditions. (Deshpande 1973)

Literature Review

The representation of women in the Ajanta murals has been examined across multiple academic disciplines, including art history, archaeology, religious studies, and aesthetics. This body of scholarship forms the foundation of the present study and engages with key debates concerning proportion, symbolism, stylistic evolution, and the cultural interpretation of nudity.

Scholarly documentation of the Ajanta caves began in the nineteenth century following their rediscovery in 1819. Early studies by researchers such as James Fergusson and John Griffiths focused primarily on descriptive documentation, including architectural surveys and painted reproductions of the murals. Their work was largely concerned with establishing chronology, identifying patronage, and analyzing architectural features. While foundational, these studies offered limited insight into the underlying aesthetic principles or the cultural and symbolic significance of female imagery depicted in the paintings (see fig.1). (Fergusson 1845) (Society 2016)



Figure 1, The Palace Scene www.thehindu.com

The stylistic evolution of Ajanta painting was subsequently examined by scholars including Benjamin Rowland and M. K. Dhavalikar, who identified successive phases of transformation in Ajanta art, moving from early Hinayana symbolic representations to later Mahayana anthropomorphic forms. (Rowland 1967) (Dhavalikar 1990) Rowland emphasized the refined modelling and rhythmic quality of linework, while the classical Indian canon of beauty through elongated limbs, rounded forms, and graceful, lyrical curves was highlighted by Stella Kramrisch. (Kramrisch 1946)

Long-term continuities in female iconography across centuries were identified through comparative studies of Bharhut, Sanchi, and Ajanta, particularly in the work of Ananda Coomaraswamy. These analyses underscore the significance of the tribhanga posture and demonstrate how standardized proportions reflect formal artistic training as well as prevailing cultural ideals (see fig.2). (Coomaraswamy 1967)

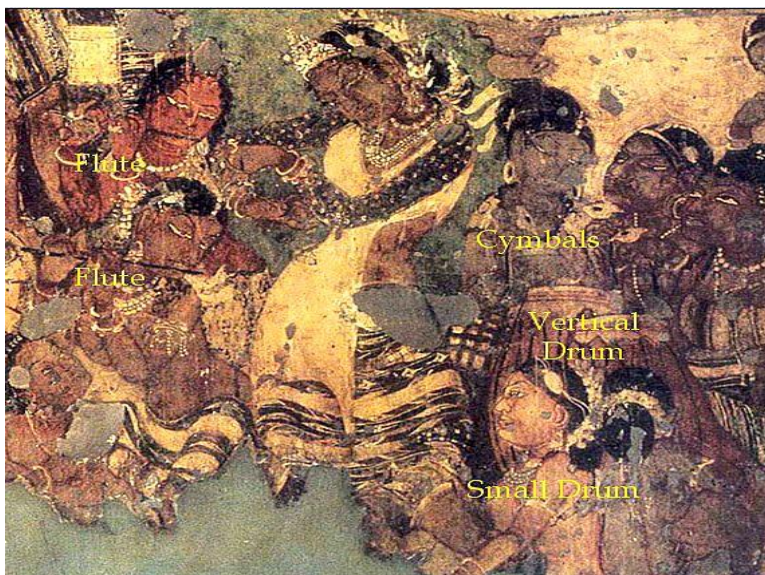


Figure 2, The Dancing Girl with Musicians www.wondermondo.com

A critical theoretical foundation is provided by texts such as the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, particularly its *Chitrasutra* chapter. (Shah 1913) These treatises were analyzed by scholars such as C. Sivaramamurti (Sivaramamurti 1976) and Kapila Vatsyayan (Vatsyayan 1986) to demonstrate that artists were guided by established principles of measurement, facial construction, and bodily posture, indicating that Ajanta painters were trained within a recognized artistic system rather than working spontaneously.

Such passages support the argument that features such as the seven-head proportion, the placement of the breasts, and specific facial ratios observed at Ajanta are grounded in classical Indian aesthetic principles. (Nardi 2009) Vidya Dehejia, Monika Zin, and Padma Kaimal discuss this cultural meaning of nudity in Indian art. Their researches claim that nudity is not necessarily the indication of eroticism but it is the symbol of fertility, purity, divinity, or spiritual high status. These interpretations question Western interpretations and place the women in Ajanta as being part of the Buddhist cosmology and the ideals of the ancient Indian society. (Dehejia 2009) (Zin 2004) (Kaimal 2003)

Research on narrative expression, especially of Spink, Ghosh and Schlingloff, looks at the place of emotion in the Jataka narratives, and the themes of devotion in Ajanta. Their analyses of compositional arrangement, directional gaze, and spatial organization provide methodological frameworks for interpreting works such as *The Dying Princess*, illustrating how visual cues are employed to evoke empathy and guide the viewer's emotional and cognitive response. (Schlingloff 2006)

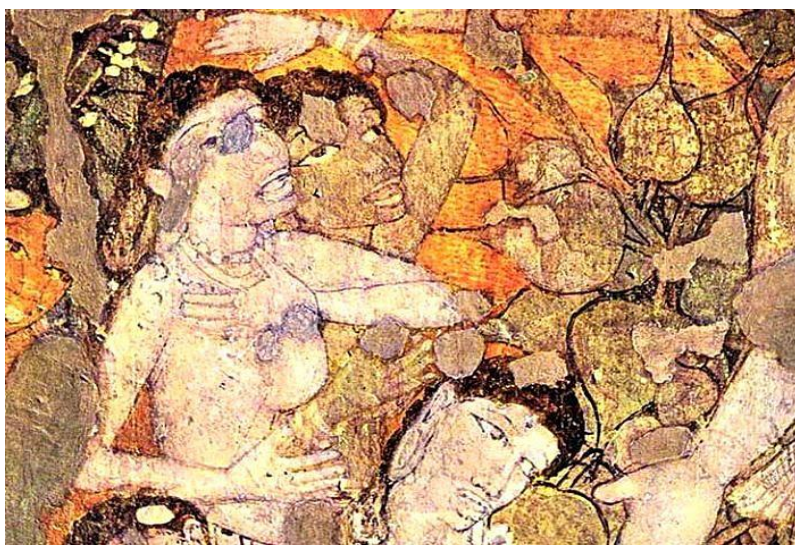


Figure 3, *The Wailing women* www.indian-heritage.org

Although the artistic style in Ajanta has a very rich scholarship, there are major gaps in the literature that exist. Studies dealing with proportional systems in feminine figures are quite few leaving unanswered questions of consistency, symbolism and intentional variation. Similarly, stylistic coherence in terms of the influence of artistic training and the workshop practices has not been discussed in detail despite the recognition of collaborative modes of production.

Discussion

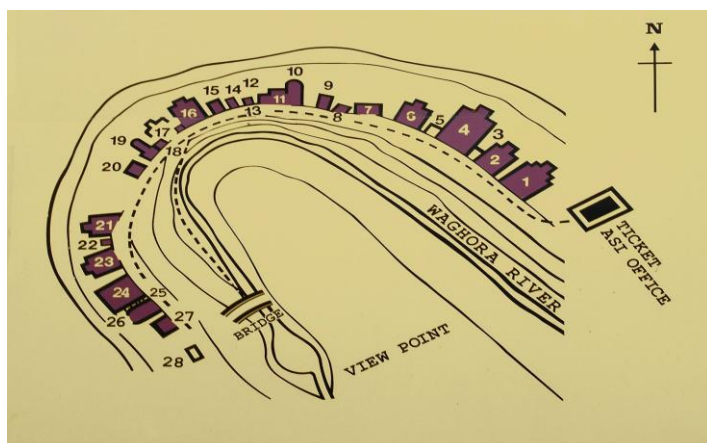


Figure 4, Map, www.kuriositas.com

The main questions answered in the present study relate to the proportional systems, which were answered by the artist and the viewer targeted by the art. It raises the question as to whether these types of figures were developed out of ideals of either nudity or of sanctity and whether the visual structure was determined by a set ideal taken eventually or by a free flow. The thirty rock-cut caves of Ajanta (see fig. 4, 5) near Aurangabad in Maharashtra are one of the most outstanding artistic manifestations of South Asian women, which introduces the female figure as a metaphysical and symbolical entity. The proportional regimes that are present in these pictures serve as regulative principles to some of the most stable aesthetic ideals of the feminine corpus that had become powerful references used as a source of artistic inspiration later. The representation of women in the painting and sculpture is intended to be created, and the formal training is evident through the use of stylistic conventions. Individual perception is bound to be shaped by concepts of beauty as dictated by the social norms, cultural values, and experience in life. However, for scholarly analysis, certain objective frameworks must be employed. In this context, the familiar notion that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder gains particular relevance, as the artists of Ajanta appear to have established specific aesthetic standards for female figures in order to convey philosophical and cultural ideas within the artistic traditions of South Asia.

Stylistic Features

The paintings and sculptures serve as the primary sources of knowing about the public and individual views of India in ancient times about women. Such visual materials allow us to see the degree of artistic literacy of the Ajanta artists, as well as how they came up with their idea of beauty and the way they represented the figures. Instead of flowing narrative backgrounds, most of the compositions come in the form of discontinuous visual fractures, which look like snapshots recording a given scene or feeling.

The earliest caves were painted in the first century BCE, shortly after the rise of the Kushan¹ rule in northern India. The depiction of the female figure has deeper historical roots, originating in the Mauryan² period, during which symbolic representations of femininity gradually evolved into fully

¹ By the middle of the first century CE, Kushan power extended from Bactria across the Hindu Kush to Gandhara and Taxila (in modern Pakistan).

² The Mauryan period of Indian history was really inaugurated by the conquest of northwest India by Alexander the Great, in 326 BC. This seems to have destabilized the political situation amongst the Aryan states in the region, and the first great conqueror in Indian history, Chandragupta Maurya (reigned 322-298 BC), to rise to power.

developed human forms. Characteristic features such as full breasts, broad hips, elongated limbs, almond-shaped eyes, and full lips persist, yet the artist moves beyond symbolism toward individualized and expressive personification. The principles outlined in the *Chitrastotra*³, a section of the *Vishnudharmottara*⁴, appear to have coexisted with and informed the innovative stylistic developments evident in Ajanta art.

Three key sites illustrate the development of female imagery from the Sunga⁵ to the Kushan periods: Bharhut, Sanchi, and Ajanta.

Bharhut establishes an early foundation for the depiction of the female figure, characterized by a rigid frontal posture directly facing the viewer. The figures are shown unclothed above the waist and adorned with jewellery such as necklaces, bracelets, and large earrings. It focuses on the physical features such as full and round breasts, broad hips and a thin waist. Personal - Individualized bodily characteristics are quite absent, with the figures being very generalized types and not individuals.

It is an agreed fact that the artistic language of Bharhut was a source of Sanchi, which is a huge step towards idealism and insertion of motion in the otherwise immobile forms. Two tremendous developments are noticeable. The first is the bending of the body into the form of an S (commonly known as the *Tribhanga* pose) which can be characterized by three folds at the hip, hips and chest, and usually a head tilted delicately to augment the S-like appearance (see fig. 6). Second is a shift in the treatment of drapery, which, while ostensibly intended to convey modesty, increasingly serves to accentuate rather than conceal the body.

At Ajanta, female figures appear in relaxed poses marked by grace and expressive vitality, features that later became defining characteristics of Ajanta's visual language. The fluidity of line enhances a sense of movement and elegance, signaling a departure from the frontal rigidity and symmetrical stillness associated with archaic art. Relief sculpture and painting at Ajanta demonstrate a conscious effort to break free from fixed formal conventions, advancing toward dynamic compositions that prioritize aesthetic appeal and lifelike motion (Bracey).

³ Which deals with the art of painting. Its compiler described it as "the legacy of the collective wisdom of the finest minds. (s 2008)

⁴ An ancient treatise on Painting.

⁵ The Sunga Empire (or Shunga Empire) is a Magadha dynasty that controlled North-central and Eastern India as well as parts of the northwest (now Pakistan) from around 185 to 73 B.C.E. It was established after the fall of the Indian Mauryan Empire.

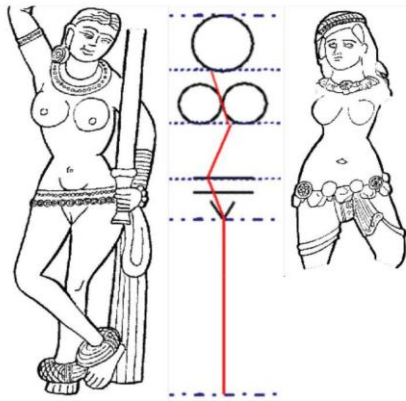


Figure 5, Tribangha The Basic Proportions, , www.kuriositas.com

Common Set of Proportions

The need to standardize and simplify bodily proportions played a central role in artistic practice. Proportional guidelines enable the identification of different artistic schools and stylistic traditions, while also revealing the aesthetic ideals adhered to by artists. At Ajanta, a shared system of proportions can be observed across numerous female figures. The face is rendered as nearly circular rather than oval, and the eyes are positioned approximately two-thirds of the way up the face. Such departures from naturalistic observation suggest that artists were not working from live models but were instead guided by idealized conventions.

The bottom of the breasts is such a distance below the chin that one head is the distance of the head. The overall height of the form is seven times the length of the head, and the crotch⁶ is situated at the median point between the upper head and the feet. Their repeated use serves to stress their constructed and, of course, non-naturalistic nature, and the emphasis on the existence of an established system of aesthetic codes as opposed to a bid at actualism.

Not only are such proportions non-naturalistic, but they also parallel the idealized images of females in the American comic book heroines of the 1970s and 1980s. Simply put, they constitute an ultimate idealization of the female body that came to become a familiar norm of figural representation, one that conveys to the beholder immediately and is physically impossible to achieve in the real world.

The other significant implication of these proportional systems is that they are an indicator of formal training in artistic skills at Ajanta. There are two ways of identifying this. To begin with, similar proportional conventions are used in various parts of India, which presupposes the exchange of common artistic standards. Second, the figures were not created using real-life models. To ensure the same proportional system in a variety of pictures, the artists have to receive systematic training because this kind of precision is brought about by disciplined practice. A good example is the children's game of Chinese whispers, which illustrates that when information is copied many times, without any form of knowledge arrangement, the information will always end up being distorted instead of consistent.

Lastly, symbolic displays like necklaces, earrings, bangles and hair, which are well blended into the characters, are part of it. These decorations are not just beauties added aside, but they also play

⁶ the part of the body where the legs join together

a direct role in the building of the identity and visual meaning in the presentation of the female figure.

Perspective

Various points of view are presented in separate panels, and it is possible to see different narrative purposes at the same time. The artists were quite fond of delicate color changes and precise expressiveness as opposed to dramatic effects and harsh contrasts. The proportional relations are manipulated based on emotive emphases and spiritual relevance, which means that scale and form were considered in a contextual setting. This is an aspect which implies that proportionality in Ajanta was not related in a rigid way but the proportions were carefully adjusted to suit the expressive and symbolic needs of any particular scene.

Nudity and Holiness

Nudity is one of the aspects that best attracts the attention of modern-day audiences. The straightforward presentation of the female body must therefore provide minimal concealment and stimulate a straightforward interaction. Two important considerations are critical in a strict interpretation of this imagery. To begin with, these characters are placed in open, sacred spaces but not within the inner circle of friends or within secular reality. Second, the women in question are not ordinary human beings, but are often idealized in either the form of divinity or that of a heavenly spirit. The scholarly discussion on the subject of the existence of nudity in Ajanta is, therefore, divided with the issues of associating it with both by paradise and view of an outdated fertility symbol. Nudity in many analyses is theorized as a source of generative power, to support the deity from nudity, which is generous and fertile. Another view of point of view is tying nudity with the concept of paradise, where the liberated soul, the one to be rewarded after rebirth, is the one who exists free of material constraints. The repetition of the phenomenon of the convex zed breasts in the Indian image culture is a presentation of the societal ideas of aesthetic perfection, care-giving, and naturalness, as opposed to the chase of anatomical truthfulness. Breasts are consistently rendered as symmetrical and firm, avoiding the natural variations seen in real human bodies. At Ajanta, such idealization suggests that physical beauty functioned as an outward manifestation of inner spiritual realization, reinforcing the close relationship between bodily form and metaphysical meaning in ancient Indian aesthetics.

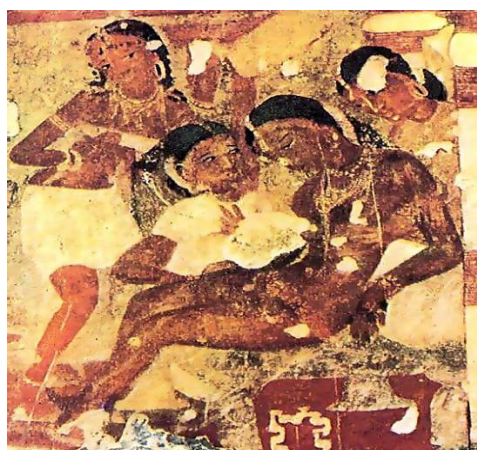


Figure 6, The dying princess www.saigan.com

Painting ‘The Dying Princess’ (Fresco work, roughly 450-500 CE)

The painting produced in cave number 16 at Ajanta is one of its own kind. As it is mentioned earlier, the Ajanta caves were built by two groups, so cave no 16 was built by the second group near 450 to 500 CE during the Gupta⁷ and post-Gupta periods. The technique employed for the fresco was to spread clay with cow-dung and rice-shell on the rough surface of the rock. Occasionally, crushed brick mixed with fibre was added. Surface was kept wet while the colour was applied, also called Buon fresco. The outlines were first drawn with red and local colours were used, usually derived from hills except for the blue colour.

The scene shows a critical scene of Nanda⁸'s wife. She fell ill after hearing the decision that her husband had left the throne and became holy man. The description of graceful misfortune, pathos and sentiments. The supremacy of the artwork in the painting lies in creating the expression rather than as a Florentine artist who was working with drawing and colour contrast. The Dying princess with relaxed head, half-closed eyes and unenergetic limbs⁹ rests on a bed (see fig.7). The depiction of the scene is quite natural and as accurate as that of in present days; it can be seen in any house. She is sympathetically attended by a female attendant standing near her in a leaning pose as if she is purely focused on her. Whereas another helper is gazing with eager eyes into her face and holding up her arm to feel her pulse. The expression on her face is in profound unease and depressing as she realises like she is a mortal and very soon her life will end in sorrow. The other two men are posed looking into an opposite direction with grief and pathos. The figures present other relations. They seem to be hopeless and waiting to begin the days of morning. One woman is hiding her face in her hands as though she has started weeping extremely.

An asymmetrical plan is used to make the subject more glorified in a sentimental stage of the incidental happening. The informal balance is chosen to shift the viewer's focus towards the princess reclining on the bed for the lasting moments of her life. Overall, the proportion of the princess seems to be larger than that of her female attendants standing aside. Thus, it can be assumed clearly that the artist is following certain rules for the proportions of the figures as per formal training.

Visually, the whole painting is planned to guide the viewer's eye into a particular direction, 'The Dying Princesses'. The eyes of the figure, except for the one figure at the back of the bed, are looking towards the princess, which makes the subject more attentive rather than opting for scattered focal areas. The sense of making a focal area establishes the command of the artist over compositional norms and handling of the subject's execution as per the requirements.

⁷ In the later part of the third century, Kushan power declined. **Chandragupta I** was a princely ruler. **Chandragupta I (r. 320-335)** was succeeded by his son, **Samudragupta (r. 335-380)** who conquered the Kushans and other smaller kingdoms and greatly expanded the emerging **Gupta Empire**. **Chandragupta II (r. 380-414)**, the son of **Samudragupta**, expanded the Empire even further so that the **Gupta Empire** was almost as large as that of the ancient and powerful Mauryan Empire. During the time of the **Gupta Empire**, Indians enjoyed a Golden Age in the arts, sciences and religion. Hinduism flowered and expanded throughout India. The Hindu epic writings of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were completed and spread to all in the Empire. (ThorFire Enterprises n.d.)

⁸ Nanda the wife of Buddha's cousin brother

⁹ *Limb* (anatomy), an organ of a human or animal

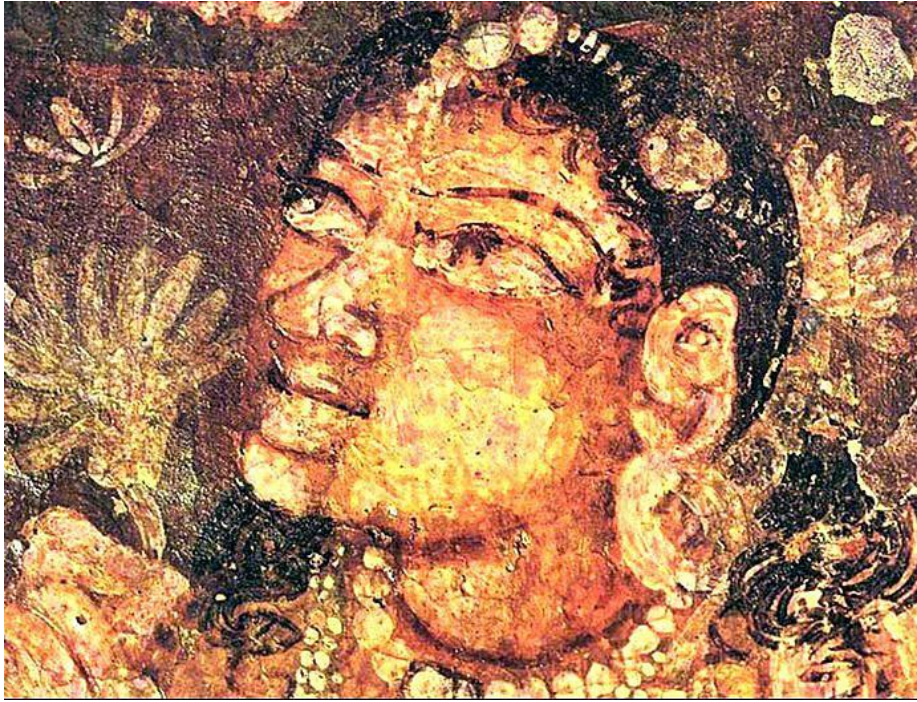


Figure 7, The Women with Lotus Flower Cave 1 6th CE. www.indian-heritage.org

The almond-like eyes are one of the rhythmic or repetitive elements in the work. Along with the specific oval-shaped faces and roundness of elongated arms and legs, the mood for expression as per the hallmark stylistic features of Ajanta art (see fig.8). However, the eyes and eyebrows are made with lines, but with slight variation, the variety of expressions is achieved quite remarkably. The same thing happens with the poses and proportion; the variation of positions and movement of faces with little pose shifting is working well to make the scene look like an animation of the situation.

The closed composition mainly serves the purpose for communication of the story. The open composition is not made, maybe the artist doesn't want to distract the viewer and to give more importance to the scene occurring (see fig.9).



Figure 8, A Queen in a Palace Scene www.wondermondo.com

Conclusion

The Ajanta paintings stress religious idealism with emotional quality. So, the painting ‘*The Dying Princess*’, cave number sixteen, is made to convey a real-life dilemma. This painting seems to be a revolt against the religious aspect, which provokes the people of the society to think about their spiritual achievement by cutting themselves off from taking responsibilities for their dependents. The sorrowful story of the princess is not only the anecdote of religious myth but is also painted sympathetically in favour of the common man’s emotional world. The sad eyes of the female helpers around are used as a symbol of sympathy for the princess, which is, in fact, a silent statement about taking care of human emotions in place of opting for rigid decisions without even considering the after effects. By looking at the painting, one can imagine how shocking a situation had been in the social structure in which they were living.

The style of the painting is narrative and a representation of the women’s social, cultural, and economic structure of the society in the Mahayana period near 580 CE. (Ghosh, <http://www.historydiscussion.net/history/historical-information-on-ellora-and-ajanta-caves/1371> n.d.) The artist seems to be successful in conveying his intentions. Through the stylised character of forms employed in the painting, it seems that the attempt to convey the silent message of sympathy and empathy is presented very smartly. The extraordinary life out of an ordinary life is the very character of the painting. The most appealing aspect is the movement factor in two-dimensional surface. The approach is towards emotions and feelings with remarkable gridlines of proportions that are mixed up.

Ajanta art was considered to be a renaissance of Indian classical art. Due to the fact that it is concerned with so many hidden features related to the artist’s own emotional and practical approach. The clues of formulating a manner with expression are the most attractive elements of the artworks done here. Even after centuries, it is still enigmatic and mysteriously amusing for the modern world.

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