

THE PAINTINGS AT AJANTA EXECUTED ON THE CANNONS OF THE CHITRASUTRA OF VISHNUDHARMOTTARA PURANA

5

Vishwajit Singh *

“A painting cleanses and curbs anxiety, augments future good, causes unequalled and pure delight, kills the evil spirits of bad dreams and pleases the household deity.”¹

The paintings at Ajanta are the works of devout artists whose themes are Buddhists, but they reflect a sublime religiosity which knows no bounds between religious faiths. These paintings site perfection described above in the quote of Chitrasutra of Vishnudharmottara. The major highlights of Indian art have been exquisite and remarkable outcomes proposed by the united artists of our flourishing past centuries. During the ancient eras when the paintings at Ajanta were commenced, the art created at our large and diverse geographical and cultural regions, certainly had the similar values of performing in a united form.

In about the 8th or the 9th century B.C in India were composed the Upanishads, philosophical texts based on traditions of knowledge developed over the years. These writings were to have a profound influence on all later Indian religious thought. The essence of these writings spoke of the relationship between the individual soul and the divine creator and the essential unity of the whole of creation. The material world was seen as Mithiya, an illusion. It was human desires and attachments which kept us bound to this ephemeral world; only by lifting the veils of the material world could mankind look beyond to the eternal. It was believed that the ecstasy which is experienced on seeing something truly beautiful, whether in nature or in art, is the eternal bliss of enlightenment. It was believed that the moment of the experience of beauty was one in which the veils of illusion were lifted. Thus, art played a very important role in Indian religious life. This sense of peace and magnanimity with the vision of examining oneself has been the limelight of the greatest art produced in India.

By the time of the exquisite second phase of Ajanta, the art of painting was

**Guest Faculty in Applied Art at SIFA, at State University of Performing and Visual Arts, Rohtak*

very highly developed in India. Along with the most marvelous murals executed on the walls of Ajanta, a remarkable treatise on painting had also been written: the Chitrasutra of the Vishnudharmottara Purana. This treatise deals with each and every aspect of the guidelines that are to be followed by the painter and how a painting is to be made, must have been prepared for the use of the guilds of the painters. The treatise provides exhaustive details of methods used in the rendering of different kinds of people, animals and landscapes; three different ways of carrying out shading, instructions on techniques of how to use colors and even the process of their preparation.

The Chitrasutra instructs that while the representations of the objects and persons, as drawn on the canvas should bear a credible resemblance to their original, the artist, at the same time, should not restrict himself to just faithful reproduction of forms and appearances, but should try to go beyond. The paintings at Ajanta remarkably enshrine a compassionate view of life. There is no creature on the painted walls of Ajanta, which does not receive the attention and reverential touch of the painter. This compassion can be very well identified in the narrative jataka scenes where every being is shown looking upon each other with expressions of infinite caring. Another awe-inspiring aspect is the inward look: The Bodhisattavas are painted with all the activity of everyday life around them, yet the look within. "He who paints waves, flames, smoke and streamers fluttering in the air, according to the movement of the wind, should be considered a great painter. He who knows 'chitra'... who represents the dead devoid of life movement and the sleeping possessed of it."²

The Chitrasutra instructs that the paintings are the greatest treasure of mankind as they have a beneficial influence on the viewer. It contains the rules and suggestions on how to depict different themes effectively. The delineation of a variety of subject matter adorns the painted walls of the Ajanta. Here the virtuous qualities which were recounted by Buddha which he wanted to present to his followers are magnificently woven together. The variety of subject matter in the Jataka stories painted on the Ajanta walls, gave the painters ample scope to depict the entire canvas of life on earth. Each Jataka painted has a different narration and individual stylistic quality.

We can very well assume that the art of painting for these artists must have surely been an act of devotion, for even to prepare the paints to be used on the walls would take weeks, which requires sincere dedication. Chitrasutra describes that this act of devotion gives the fruit of Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. The

painter is informed through the Chitrasutra of the relative detailed measurements of different parts of the body, in a human being from different lands and of varied temperaments. Yet even after instructing this immense body of knowledge and complex rules framed over the years in the hands of the painter, the treatise insists that it is the inspiration gained by and individual artist which gives life and true meaning to a work of art: which 'opens the eyes of the painting'. This parallel inspiration is felt in the artists of Ajanta, which gave them liberty to convey their thoughts in the most unbolt manner.

The artists of Ajanta utilized a very simple palette consisting of five main colors, as prescribed in the ancient treatise: yellow (pita) obtained from ochre that was found in the nearby hills, white (shveta) derived from lime, red (rakta), black (Krishna) was obtained from soot and the color green (harit) was extracted from glauconitic, which was a locally found mineral. Lapis lazuli was added to the color palette only in the second phase of Ajanta. It was brought from the north western parts of India. In order to produce other tones and shades these colors were mixed together.

Truly the painter of these caves was a true devout; he expressed his devotion through his art and was not limited to any single discipline of faith or religion. Similar thoughts are expressed by Dr. Sivaramamurti in his translation of the Vishnudharmottara. "The painter in India was almost like a yogi lost in his art... He created his masterpieces not in the spirit of imposing his personality on an admiring world with a desire for personal honor and fame, but obliterated himself almost deriving supreme satisfaction in that his art was an offering to God."

This devotional quality and humble approach is to be seen in each and every line drawn and painted on these walls. The painter here was not just concerned with the practical physical world or limited in depicting the outer human form rather laid emphasis on portraying the life within. The murals at Ajanta showcase every man and woman painted to constantly look within. It is this magnanimous portrayal of the life of the spirit rather than the physical existence which dominates each work. The Form and Content of these murals skillfully intermingle constantly supporting one another, leading the viewer finally to the message of peace and serenity of Buddha. Similarly the use of brush and line do not dominate the physical appearance of a form relatively have a soft and gentle approach of conveying the true message of life. Foreshortening, the technical aspect of painting is skillfully instructed in the Chitrasutra and majestically brought to life in the art of these murals. These artists were very well aware of optical perspective as they do not

just concentrate on one point perspective instead efforts are seen in producing the best effects to the most important part of the painting. Therefore the depiction of perspective here varies according to the objects painted. For instance the roof or the canopy drawn is viewed from below but on the other end the figures are purposely brought forward to draw the attention of the viewer, reversing the normal perspective. Another fine example is the dominant figure of Buddha depicted before his wife Yashodhara and son Rahula in the cave 17. It is evident that because of the spiritual importance of Buddha he is made to appear larger in proportion to the others.

“The masters praise the rekhas (delineation and articulation of forms); the connoisseurs praise the display of light and shade, women like the display of ornaments, the rest of the public like richness of colours. Considering this, great care should be taken in the work of chitra, so that, (oh) best of men, it may be appreciated by everyone.”³

Foot Notes:

1. Translated by Dr. Stella Kramrisch. *Chitrasutra of the Vishnudharmottara Purana* ch.43
2. Translated by Dr. Stella Kramrisch. *Chitrasutra of the Vishnudharmottara Purana Part 3, ch.43, v. 28.*
3. *Ibid.*

References

1. Behl K. Benoy. *The Ajanta Caves: Ancient Paintings of Buddhist India*
2. Seth, Mira, *Indian Painting the Great Mural Tradition.*
3. Edith Tomory, *A History of Fine Arts in India and the West.*
4. Douglas, Barret and Basil Gray, *Painting of India, 1963.*
5. Nihar Ranjan, Ray, *The Classical Age Painting and other Arts.*
6. Rowland, Benjamin, *The Art and Architecture of India, Buddhist-Hindu-Jain.*