

Exploring the Chitra-Sutra Aesthetics of the Vishnudharmottara Purana in the Classical Murals of the Ajanta

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Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 24-11-25

Approved: 05-12-25

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Artistic Narration 2025,
Vol. XVI, No. 2,
Article No.18 Pg.115-121

Similarity Check: 12%

Online available at:

<https://anubooks.com/journal-volume/artistic-narration-dec-2025-vol-xvi-no2>

Referred by:

DOI:<https://doi.org/10.31995/an.2025.v16i02.018>

Abstract

This paper explores the visual language of the Ajanta murals in dialogue with the aesthetic principles outlined in the Chitra-Sutra, a renowned treatise on painting embedded within the Vishnudharmottara Purana. This study examines how ancient Indian artists translated narrative strategies, metaphysical ideals, and technical prescriptions into pictorial form. An analysis is to investigate the fundamental elements of the Chitra-Sutra, such as colour symbolism, gesture, proportion, emotional expression, narrative sequencing, and spatial organization as articulated in the murals of Ajanta. This research focuses on the deeper artistic philosophy articulated in Ajanta's paintings, apart from merely decorative or narrative illustrations that reaffirm their status as a pinnacle of Indian artistic consciousness. These paintings converge scriptural theory and creative practice to bring forth a visual tradition that is highly refined technically and deeply resonant spiritually. By placing these paintings amidst the seminal treatise of the Chitra Sutra, the study investigates the artistic sophistication of the murals relating physiognomy, colour gradation, illusionistic depth, and spatial rhythm. Beyond the visual appeal, the paper contextualises these paintings within a broader cultural and philosophical milieu, focusing on how the Puranic art theory produced a uniquely synchronized visual tradition.

Keywords

Ajanta murals, Chitra-Sutra, Vishnudharmottara Purana, Indian art aesthetics.

Method and Material: The methodology for this paper includes a comparative and interdisciplinary approach that approaches textual interpretations, contextual analysis, and visual examination, thereby providing a holistic understanding of how the Ajanta artists did not just adhere to but also expanded the aesthetic principles of the Chitra-Sutra. The theoretical principles of the Chitra-Sutra are systematically compared to the visual documentation of the selected Ajanta murals, to iconographically assess and identify the elements in common between both. Historical research illuminates the environment in which these paintings were created.

Introduction: One of the most sophisticated achievements of ancient Indian art, celebrated for its technical mastery, narrative richness, and spiritual depth, is the Ajanta murals. The creation of the cave paintings at Ajanta took place in two major phases. The early phase was the Satavahana Period, beginning from the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century BCE. The latter phase was the Vakataka Period that spanned the 5th century CE. The artistic narration in these caves stretched for a period of 600 years. Spink opines, “Nearly two hundred years ago, an English soldier, out tiger-hunting, “discovered” Ajanta, scratching his name on one of the pillars of Cave 10: John Smith, 28th Cavalry, 28th April 1819. This huge cave and four others nearby date from 100 BC to 150 A.D...It was not until about 462 A.D that a remarkable Buddhist renaissance began at Ajanta under the aegis of the Vakataka emperor Harisena” (Spink, 2014, p. xvii). It was during the 5th-century Vakataka Dynasty that the paintings in Ajanta, “The twenty-nine Buddhist caves created by the Vakatakas in a remote ravine near the ancient town of Ajanta form a devotional complex which ranks as one of the world’s most startling achievements, created at the very apogee of India’s Golden Age” (Spink, 2005). To understand the artistic excellence and intellectual foundations of Ajanta murals, the Chitra Sutra, an authoritative treatise on painting found within the Vishnudharmottara Purana, offers valuable fundamentals and insight. Stella Kramrisch argues, “The chapters of the Vishnudharmottara dealing with painting must have been compiled in the seventh century, contemporary with the latest paintings of Ajanta; and so we get acquainted with the theories prevalent at the time of the full maturity of their practice” (Internet Archive, 2022). The Ajanta murals predate the final compilation of the Chitra Sutra, sharing a broader continuum of Indian artistic thought rooted in shared cultural philosophies, oral canons of art instruction, and visual traditions. This paper is an exploration of the aesthetic principles described in the Chitra Sutra resonating within the visual narrations of the Ajanta Caves.

Discussion: The deeper artistic continuity in the monumental practice of the scriptural theory of the Chitra Sutra, also underlines India’s classical painting tradition and highlights the Ajanta murals as a living embodiment of the ideals articulated in this aesthetic discourse. The relationship of Ajanta mural paintings with the philosophical

content of the Chitra Sutra can be understood through the shared aesthetic principle that the painters of Ajanta exemplified in their guild practices, oral training, and cultural conventions. Although, the compilation dates of the Chitra Sutra and Ajanta paintings did not intersect, as the Chitra Sutra from the Vishnudharmottara Purana is compiled slightly later, “the Vishnudharmottara cannot date earlier than the 5th century A.D.” (Internet Archive, 2022), but the paintings clearly suggest that the canons of the treatise was codified to the artistic principles already in practice. “The Citrasutra of the Visnudharmottara-purana, Khanda III chapters 35 to 43” (Dave-Mukherji, P. (2001) collectively form the most comprehensive textual account of ancient Indian painting, dealing with the purpose of art, the ideal qualities of an artist, the canonical rules and principles governing proportion, line, and colour.

They also elaborate on the role of *rasa* and *bhava*, methods of composition, poses, expression, the depiction of divine and human figures, along with guidelines on the materials and techniques used in painting. Together, these chapters present an organised aesthetic framework that reflects the mature and developed consciousness of classical India. Chitra Sutra offers a theoretical foundation for Indian painting. In the context of Ajanta, the Chitra Sutra treatise does not invent new rules; rather, it codifies an already existing body of artistic knowledge. By emphasising the ability to communicate emotions, portray narratives, and reflect higher philosophical truths, the Chitra Sutra describes painting as an intellectual pursuit, a Sacred act, and a skilled discipline. “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” (Mukherji, 2024).



Fig.1 Unknown Artists, ‘Mahajanaka Jataka’ showing King Janaka and his wife Sivali, circa 5th century CE, Fresco at Cave 1, Ajanta caves, Maharashtra
Source: (Mukherji, 2024)

The paintings of Ajanta are the creations of pious artists with Buddhist themes, but they also show a sublime devotion that transcends theological boundaries. The Chitrasutra of Vishnudharmottara's quotation above describes the perfection of these paintings. Exquisite and outstanding results created by the unified artists of our prosperous past centuries have been the main highlights of Indian art. The art produced in our vast and varied geographical and cultural locations undoubtedly shared the same values of performing in a unified form during ancient times, when the paintings at Ajanta were first made.

The Upanishads are philosophical writings that originated in India in the eighth or ninth century B.C. and are based on knowledge traditions that evolved throughout time. All subsequent Indian religious thought was to be significantly impacted by these works. The bond between the individual soul and the almighty creator as well as the fundamental unity of the all of creation were major themes in these writings. The material world was perceived as an illusion, Mithiya. Human attachments and aspirations kept us confined to this fleeting world; the only way for humanity to see beyond the material world was to lift its veils.

The eternal happiness of enlightenment was thought to be the ecstasy felt upon witnessing anything genuinely beautiful, whether in nature or in art. It was thought that when one experienced beauty, the veils of illusion were lifted. As a result, art was crucial to Indian religious life. The greatest artwork created in India, the Ajanta murals, focuses on the feeling of tranquillity and generosity with the goal of self-examination. Stella Kramrisch quotes from the Vishnudharmottara, "Painting is the best of all arts, conducive to dharma, pleasure, wealth and emancipation. It gives the greatest pleasure, when placed in a house" (Internet Archive, 2022). Painting was a well-developed art form in India by the time of the magnificent second phase of Ajanta. The Chitrasutra of the Vishnudharmottara Purana is a wonderful treatise on painting that was authored at some point, in addition to the most magnificent paintings painted on the walls of Ajanta. The book offers comprehensive information on how various types of people, animals, and landscapes are rendered, including three different shading processes, colour usage guidelines, and even the preparatory process.

The term *Citrasutras* is derived from the Sanskrit, "meaning 'treatise on painting', *Citrasutra* is a compound of two words: *citra*, meaning picture, sketch, delineation, and *sutra*, meaning aphoristic rule" Nardi, I. (2006). The Chitra Sutra 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. No creature on the painted walls of Ajanta 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.

According to the Chitrasutra, paintings have a positive impact on the observer, making them the greatest treasure of humanity. It includes guidelines and recommendations for effectively illustrating various concepts. The Ajanta's painted walls are decorated with the delineation of many subjects. Here, the virtues that Buddha described and wished to impart to his disciples are beautifully interwoven. The Jataka stories painted on the walls of the Ajanta had a wide range of subjects, which allowed the painters to portray every aspect of earthly existence. Every Jataka painting has a unique style and narrative.

Since it would take weeks to prepare the paints to be used on the walls, we can very well presume that painting was an act of devotion for the artists of Ajanta. This act of devotion yields the fruit of Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha, according to the Chitrasutra. Through the Chitrasutra, the painter is educated about the relatively precise measurements of various body parts in people from various countries and temperaments. However, the treatise maintains that an individual artist's inspiration is what gives a piece of art life and actual meaning—that is, what “opens the eyes of the painting”—even after imparting this vast body of information and intricate laws that have been developed over the years in the hands of the painter. The painters of Ajanta experienced this simultaneous inspiration, which allowed them to express their ideas most unconventionally. According to the ancient treatise, the artists of Ajanta used a very basic palette of five primary colors: yellow (pita), which was derived from ochre found in the surrounding hills; white (shveta), which was derived from lime; red (rakta); black (Krishna), which was derived from soot; and green (harit), which was extracted from glauconitic, a mineral found locally. Only Ajanta's second phase had lapis lazuli in the color scheme. It was imported from India's northwest regions. These colors were combined to create additional tones and tints.

Truly, the painter of these caves was a true devotee; he expressed his devotion through his art and was not limited to any single discipline of faith or religion. Similar thoughts are expressed by C. 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” (Sivaramamurti, 1978).

Every single line drawn and painted on these walls reflects this humble attitude and devotional nature. Here, the painter focused on capturing the life within rather than merely the practical physical reality or being constrained in his ability to depict the human form from the outside. Every man and woman represented in Ajanta's murals is encouraged

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to always look inside. Each work is dominated by this generous depiction of the life of the soul rather than the bodily existence. These murals' Form and Content deftly blend together and continuously support one another, ultimately bringing the observer to the Buddha's message of tranquillity and calm. In a similar vein, the use of brush and line does not dominate a form's outward look; instead, it conveys the true meaning of life in a gentle and sensitive manner. Foreshortening, the Chitrasutra expertly teaches painting technique, which is magnificently rendered in these murals. These artists were highly aware of optical perspective because they focused on creating the best effects for the most significant portion of the picture rather than only focusing on one-point perspective. As a result, the way perspective is portrayed here differs depending on the painted items. For example, the canopy or roof is depicted from below, but the figures are intentionally moved forward to catch the viewer's attention on the opposite end, reversing conventional perspective. The prominent image of Buddha in front of his son Rahula and wife Yashodhara in cave 17 is another excellent example. Buddha is supposed to appear greater in relation to the others due to his spiritual significance.

Chitrasutra is a framework that urges critical engagement with traditional art categories, making it highly relevant to the art of Ajanta, "The Citrasutra is not only about updating our knowledge of the text with the help of new manuscripts evidence but raises larger questions about the need to critically engage in the interrogation of the traditional art via the categories deployed in the Silpa sastras" (Basu, 2002). One of the richest fields for interrogation of the aesthetic concepts, artistic values, and technical categories articulated in the Shilpa Sastras is provided by the Ajanta paintings.

Conclusion:

By examining Ajanta through the lens of Chitra Sutras, researchers and scholars can evaluate how the theoretical guidelines concerning knowledge of proportion, gesture, narrative arrangement, colour theory, and emotional expressions were perceived and applied in practice by the Ajanta artists. The relationship between the Ajanta murals and the Chitra Sutra encourages a deeper exploration of how artistic knowledge spread, evolved and manifested visually in monumental murals. Thus, the Ajanta paintings became a living site where the teachings and acquaintance of the Chitra Sutra, such as *rasa*, *bhava*, *Rekha*, *citra-yojna*, and *tala-mana*, can be revalued, recontextualised, and interpreted, providing a dynamic interaction between India's classical traditional creations of art and the textual theory.

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