

Mauryan Art

The Mauryan period (circa 322 BCE - 185 BCE) marks a significant chapter in the history of Indian art, representing the first major flowering of monumental art and architecture in ancient India. Under the patronage of the Mauryan emperors, particularly Ashoka, the visual arts evolved to reflect the political, religious, and cultural aspirations of the time.

Stupas: Sanchi

1. Introduction to Stupas:

- Stupas are dome-shaped structures that were originally built to house relics of the Buddha and serve as places of meditation and worship. The tradition of constructing stupas began during the Mauryan period and became a defining feature of Buddhist architecture.
- The stupa at Sanchi, located in Madhya Pradesh, is one of the most iconic and well-preserved examples of Mauryan art and architecture. It was commissioned by Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE.

2. Architectural Features of the Sanchi Stupa:

- **The Dome (Anda):** The central dome of the Sanchi Stupa, known as the Anda, symbolizes the mound of dirt used to cover the Buddha's remains. It represents the world mountain and the dome of heaven.
- **Harmika and Yasti:** Atop the dome is the Harmika, a square railing that encloses the Yasti, a central pillar symbolizing the axis of the universe. The Yasti often supports a series of stone discs called Chattras, which represent the three jewels of Buddhism: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.
- **Toranas (Gateways):** The Sanchi Stupa is surrounded by a stone railing with four elaborately carved gateways, known as Toranas, facing the cardinal directions. These gateways are adorned with intricate relief sculptures depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha, Jataka tales, and various motifs symbolizing Buddhist teachings.
- **Medhi (The Platform):** The dome sits on a circular platform called the Medhi, which is accessible by a staircase and is meant for circumambulation, a practice known as Pradakshina. The act of walking around the stupa in a clockwise direction is a symbolic gesture of reverence.

3. Artistic Significance:

- The Sanchi Stupa represents the artistic culmination of Buddhist religious architecture during the Mauryan period. The detailed carvings on the Toranas, though created slightly later during the Shunga period, reflect the narrative art that flourished in ancient India. These carvings are not just decorative but serve as visual sermons, educating the devotees about the life and teachings of the Buddha.
- The stupa also illustrates the integration of local and regional artistic traditions into the Buddhist architectural framework, making it a landmark in the development of Indian art.

Ashokan Pillars and Edicts

1. The Ashokan Pillars:

- Emperor Ashoka, one of India's most renowned rulers, is celebrated for his efforts to spread Buddhism across his vast empire. One of his most enduring contributions to Indian art is the series of monolithic pillars erected throughout the subcontinent, known as the Ashokan Pillars.
- These pillars were not only architectural marvels but also carried inscriptions, known as edicts, which articulated Ashoka's policies, moral teachings, and his commitment to the Dhamma (the Buddhist way of life).

2. Architectural and Artistic Features:

- **Monolithic Structure:** Each Ashokan Pillar was carved from a single piece of stone, typically sandstone. The pillars stand tall, ranging from 40 to 50 feet in height, and were transported over great distances, reflecting the advanced engineering skills of the Mauryan artisans.
- **Capital:** The top of the pillar, known as the capital, is the most artistically significant part. The most famous of these is the Lion Capital at Sarnath, which features four Asiatic lions seated back-to-back on a circular abacus. The abacus is adorned with carvings of animals representing the four cardinal directions—a horse (west), a bull (east), an elephant (south), and a lion (north)—along with the Dharma Chakra (Wheel of Law).
- **Inscriptions (Edicts):** The edicts inscribed on the pillars were written in Prakrit using the Brahmi script. These inscriptions communicate Ashoka's vision of moral and ethical governance, emphasizing non-violence, compassion, and respect for all living beings.

3. Historical and Cultural Impact:

- The Ashokan Pillars and Edicts stand as a testament to the Mauryan Empire's power and the emperor's dedication to spreading Buddhist principles. The Lion Capital of Sarnath was adopted as the national emblem of India after independence, and the Dharma Chakra from the capital is featured on the Indian national flag, highlighting the enduring legacy of Mauryan art.
- These pillars also symbolize the unification of the Indian subcontinent under a single ruler, marking the first significant use of art and architecture as instruments of statecraft and moral education.

Mauryan art, as exemplified by the Sanchi Stupa and the Ashokan Pillars, represents a critical moment in the history of Indian art and culture. These structures not only served religious and political purposes but also laid the foundation for the artistic and architectural traditions that would flourish in the centuries to come. The Mauryan period is thus a defining era that continues to influence Indian aesthetics and symbolism.

Gandhara and Mathura Schools of Art

The Gandhara and Mathura schools of art represent two significant stylistic traditions that emerged during the Kushan Empire (1st century BCE to 3rd century CE). These schools are particularly renowned for their contributions to Buddhist art, including the development of the first anthropomorphic images of the Buddha. Despite their differences, both schools played a crucial role in the artistic and cultural syncretism that characterized this period.

Buddhist Iconography

1. Gandhara School of Art:

- **Hellenistic Influence:** The Gandhara school, centered in the region that is now Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan, is famous for its synthesis of Greco-Roman and Indian artistic traditions. This fusion is evident in the realistic depiction of human figures, use of drapery, and emphasis on anatomical details.
- **Buddha Imagery:** Gandhara artists were among the first to create anthropomorphic images of the Buddha. The Buddha is often depicted with wavy hair, a serene expression, and draped in a Greco-Roman toga-like robe. This representation shows a blend of classical Greek realism with Buddhist themes.
- **Narrative Reliefs:** Gandhara art is also known for its narrative reliefs that depict scenes from the Jataka tales (stories of the Buddha's previous lives) and the life of the Buddha. These reliefs were typically carved on the walls of stupas and monasteries, serving both decorative and didactic purposes.

2. Mathura School of Art:

- **Indigenous Influence:** The Mathura school, located in what is now Uttar Pradesh, India, developed a distinct style that was more Indian in character. It emphasized the spiritual and symbolic aspects of Buddhist art, with less influence from foreign artistic traditions.
- **Buddha Imagery:** In contrast to Gandhara, the Buddha in Mathura art is depicted with a more robust and fleshy form, symbolizing spiritual strength and vitality. The figures are often shown with a plain, monk-like robe that leaves the right shoulder bare, and the facial features are more stylized, with a focus on the spiritual aura (lakshanas) of the Buddha.
- **Yaksha and Yakshi Figures:** Mathura art also produced a significant number of Yaksha (male nature spirits) and Yakshi (female nature spirits) figures. These figures, which predate Buddhist art, were adapted into Buddhist iconography, symbolizing fertility, abundance, and protection.

Syncretism in Art

1. Cultural Synthesis in Gandhara Art:

- **Greco-Roman Elements:** The Gandhara school is a prime example of syncretism, where Greek artistic elements like the depiction of deities in human form, naturalistic body proportions, and realistic drapery were merged with Buddhist themes. This fusion

resulted in a unique style that spread across Central and South Asia, influencing Buddhist art in regions as far as China and Japan.

- **Buddhist and Hellenistic Motifs:** Gandhara art often features motifs such as Corinthian columns, acanthus leaves, and vine scrolls, all of which are borrowed from classical Greek art. These elements were adapted to Buddhist contexts, creating a visual language that was both familiar to the local population and resonant with the spiritual ideals of Buddhism.

2. Indigenous and Foreign Influences in Mathura Art:

- **Integration of Local Traditions:** The Mathura school represents a syncretism that was more indigenous in nature. It absorbed and reinterpreted earlier Indian artistic traditions, such as the Yaksha worship and the stylistic conventions of the Mauryan and Shunga periods, while also integrating elements from Gandhara and Central Asian influences.
- **Iconographic Innovation:** Mathura artists innovated in the representation of deities, especially in the transition from representing the Buddha symbolically (e.g., through stupas, footprints, or the Bodhi tree) to depicting him in human form. This innovation laid the groundwork for future developments in Hindu and Jain art as well.

3. Cross-Cultural Exchange:

- **Silk Road Connections:** The syncretism seen in both Gandhara and Mathura schools can be attributed to the extensive trade and cultural exchanges along the Silk Road. This network facilitated the movement of artists, merchants, and religious ideas, leading to a blend of artistic traditions that transcended regional boundaries.
- **Spread of Buddhist Art:** The art from these two schools played a crucial role in spreading Buddhist iconography across Asia. The Gandhara style, in particular, influenced the depiction of the Buddha in Central Asia, China, and Japan, while the Mathura style had a profound impact on the development of Hindu and Jain art in India.

The Gandhara and Mathura schools of art are emblematic of the cultural and artistic syncretism that characterized ancient India during the Kushan period. Through their innovative approaches to Buddhist iconography and their blending of indigenous and foreign elements, these schools not only enriched the visual language of Indian art but also contributed to the global spread of Buddhist imagery and ideals. Their legacy continues to be felt in the art and culture of South Asia and beyond.

Gupta Period Art

The Gupta period (circa 320 CE - 550 CE) is often referred to as the "Golden Age" of India, a time when Indian culture, art, and religion flourished under the patronage of the Gupta emperors. This era is renowned for its advancements in sculpture, the development of iconic religious imagery, and the beginnings of temple architecture that would influence Indian art for centuries.

Sculpture and Iconography

1. Classical Refinement:

- **Elegance and Idealization:** Gupta sculptures are celebrated for their grace, proportion, and idealized forms, reflecting a classical refinement that became the standard for Indian art. The figures are depicted with serene expressions, fluid lines, and a sense of inner spirituality, which are hallmarks of this period.
- **Sandstone and Bronze Works:** Artists during the Gupta period primarily worked with sandstone, particularly the red and cream-colored sandstone from Mathura, and bronze. These materials were expertly carved and cast to produce figures that exemplify the period's artistic ideals.

2. Religious Imagery:

- **Buddhist Iconography:** The depiction of the Buddha reached its zenith during the Gupta period. The Buddha is often shown in a standing or seated position, with a calm, meditative expression. Key features include the ushnisha (a cranial protuberance symbolizing wisdom), the urna (a mark on the forehead representing spiritual insight), and elongated earlobes, symbolizing renunciation.
- **Hindu Deities:** The Gupta period also saw the standardization of the iconography of major Hindu deities such as Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi. Vishnu is often depicted as a four-armed figure holding a conch, discus, mace, and lotus, while Shiva is shown with a third eye and matted hair, sometimes in the form of Nataraja, the cosmic dancer.
- **Jain Tirthankaras:** Jain art during the Gupta period depicted the Tirthankaras, the spiritual teachers of Jainism, in a style similar to that of Buddhist and Hindu sculptures, with an emphasis on meditative poses and serene expressions.

3. Key Examples of Gupta Sculpture:

- **The Sarnath Buddha:** One of the most famous examples of Gupta sculpture is the Sarnath Buddha, found in the Sarnath Museum. This statue represents the Buddha in the Dharmachakra Pravartana Mudra (the gesture of teaching), symbolizing the first sermon at Sarnath. The figure's smooth, unadorned body, delicate facial features, and soft drapery epitomize Gupta artistry.
- **The Vishnu Anantasayana from Deogarh:** This panel shows Vishnu reclining on the serpent Ananta, a motif that became central to Vishnu iconography. The scene is rich with symbolism, representing the cosmic balance maintained by Vishnu.

Temple Architecture Beginnings

1. The Rise of Temple Architecture:

- **Shift from Rock-Cut to Structural Temples:** The Gupta period marked the transition from rock-cut architecture, exemplified by earlier caves such as those at Ajanta, to the construction of free-standing, structural temples. This shift allowed for greater architectural innovation and the development of distinct regional styles.

- **Temple as a Cosmic Diagram:** Gupta temples were designed as representations of the cosmos, with a central shrine (garbhagriha) symbolizing the spiritual core, surrounded by a series of spaces for circumambulation and worship. The layout was often based on a sacred geometric plan, reflecting the Hindu concept of the universe.

2. Early Gupta Temples:

- **Temple No. 17 at Sanchi:** One of the earliest surviving Gupta temples, Temple No. 17 at Sanchi, is a simple yet elegant structure featuring a flat roof and a small sanctum (garbhagriha) with a porch supported by pillars. This temple represents the nascent phase of structural temple architecture.
- **Dasavatara Temple at Deogarh:** The Dasavatara Temple at Deogarh, dedicated to Vishnu, is another important example of early Gupta temple architecture. It features a square sanctum with a flat roof, surrounded by a covered ambulatory path. The temple is adorned with intricate carvings that depict various avatars of Vishnu, blending sculpture and architecture seamlessly.

3. Architectural Features and Innovations:

- **Shikara (Temple Tower):** The Gupta period saw the early development of the Shikara, the towering spire above the sanctum that later became a defining feature of Hindu temple architecture. While these early examples were relatively simple, they laid the groundwork for the more elaborate and towering Shikaras of later periods.
- **Ornamentation and Symbolism:** Gupta temples were often decorated with carvings and reliefs that illustrated scenes from mythology and epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata. These decorations served both a religious and an educational purpose, teaching devotees about the divine stories and principles through visual art.

4. Legacy of Gupta Architecture:

- **Influence on Later Temples:** The architectural forms and decorative styles developed during the Gupta period profoundly influenced subsequent temple architecture across India. The basic temple layout established during this time—consisting of a sanctum, a porch, and a surrounding pathway—became the blueprint for future temple designs.
- **Spread Across Regions:** The innovations in temple architecture during the Gupta period spread across the Indian subcontinent, influencing regional styles in places like Odisha, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. The temples of the Gupta period are seen as the forerunners of the grand temple complexes of later periods, such as the Chola and Hoysala temples.

The Gupta period represents a pinnacle in the development of Indian art and architecture. Through their advancements in sculpture and the beginnings of temple architecture, the artists and architects of the Gupta era set the stage for centuries of artistic achievement. Their work not only reflects the religious and cultural values of their time but also laid the foundation for the rich and diverse traditions of Indian art that followed.