Indian Art
Partha Mitter

This concise, yet lively, new survey guides the reader through over 2000 years of Indian art and architecture. A rich artistic tradition is fully explored through the Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, colonial, and contemporary periods, incorporating discussion of modern Bangladesh and Pakistan, traditional women artists, tribal artists, and the decorative arts.

Combining a clear overview with much fascinating detail, Mitter succeeds in bringing to life the true diversity of Indian culture. He discusses a wide range of examples from the influence of Islam on the Mughal court, resulting in the world-famous Taj Mahal and exquisite miniature paintings, to the nationalist and global concerns of more recent art including the rise of female artists, the stunning architecture of Charles Correa, and the vibrant contemporary art scene.

The very particular character of Indian art is set within its cultural and religious milieu, raising important issues about the profound differences between Western and Indian ideas of beauty and eroticism in art.

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Preface

In 1977, I had argued in *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art* that colonial readings of ancient Indian art were in need of revising. The last two decades have seen scholars questioning the dominant western canon, which treats Indian art as an adjunct of a universal art history. There is a need for a reassessment of the way in which we look at, and talk about, Indian art. The interesting question is not what Indian art shares with western art, but how it differs from it. One of the hidden assumptions of Indian art and architectural history has been the belief in the universal validity of artistic teleology, where all art is judged by whether or not it embodies notions of progress. While this has been the cornerstone of European art since Vasari, it is not the case for Indian art. This is not to say, however, that the evolution of artistic styles is irrelevant to India.

An insight into the unique qualities of Indian art is best achieved through a broad cultural history which places art production and patronage in its social and cultural contexts. Unlike the narrow western interpretation of fine art, the distinction between fine and decorative arts was not pronounced in India, which evolved, for example, a great tradition of decorated utensils. Any discussion of Indian art must encompass a wide range of different media: architecture, sculpture, illustrated manuscripts, painting, miniatures, textiles, and latterly photography and installation work.

It is inappropriate to attempt a purely stylistic analysis that uses categories and influences derived from the West as these do not take into account the very particular cultural and political developments of the Indian subcontinent. However, Indian art can be usefully separated into specific periods each reflecting certain religious, political, and cultural developments. These run as follows: Hinduism and Buddhism of the ancient period (c. 300 BCE–1700 CE); the period of Islamic ascendency (c. 712–1527 CE); the colonial period (1757–1947); and finally Independence and the postcolonial period (post-1947). This book redresses the balance of previous discussions of Indian art by including analysis of the colonial and later periods as well as the arts of women and tribal peoples.
By remapping the chronology of ancient Indian art history we can better appreciate the achievements of ancient Indian art. The current dating of Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain art, largely based on James Ferguson’s pioneering work, assumes that ancient Indian art, which began with ‘simple’ and elegant early Buddhist sculptures and monuments, attained perfection in the ‘classical’ Gupta period in the fifth century CE. Then followed a period of continuous decay, represented by many-armed Hindu deities and florid Hindu temples. Such a judgement, grounded on the western classical idea of simplicity as perfection, and on decoration as a sign of decadence, fails to appreciate the ornamentation of Hindu temples as an essential expression of Indian taste. This perception has led not only to a serious imbalance in tracing the evolution of Indian art but also to the systematic neglect of great Hindu temples of the later period. When we accept that Indian taste, which blends simplicity with richness, does not necessarily conform to Winckelmann’s ideal of ‘noble simplicity and quiet grandeur’, we begin to see these temples in a different light. Thus it was not in the Gupta period in the fifth century, hitherto regarded as the culmination of ancient Indian art, but much later in the tenth century and beyond that temple builders and sculptors gained the requisite experience to create the dazzling ornamented surfaces of Khajuraho, Konarak, Tanjavur, and Madurai, to name a few of the striking temple sites.

In short, we need to see the development of ancient Indian art not in terms of a ‘classical age’, nor in terms of a linear development, but rather as a series of paradigm shifts bringing to prominence different aims and objectives in different periods and regions. Thus, for each region, we should locate specific artistic and architectural objectives and their fulfillment in advanced edifices. In North India, for instance, only from the tenth century do these conditions attain fulfillment, but significantly, great temple building activity continues until the thirteenth century. After that period, Islam ushers in a different form of architecture in the region. In South India, a peak is reached in the Cola period in c.1000 CE, to be followed by different sets of objectives between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries at Madurai, Srinangam, Rameswaram, and other late monuments. In the colonial era we again meet with a different set of rules, based on European architectural and artistic practices. While rejecting extraneous criteria such as a ‘classical age’ to judge ancient Indian art, we should not, in a fit of cultural relativism, renounce all notions of quality and of development. Ancient Indians knew the difference between outstanding and inferior examples of art. Thus in order to establish what was the summit of Indian artistic tradition, we must try and retrieve the aesthetic conditions that prevailed among Indian artists and patrons themselves.

Unlike that of Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain art, the historiography of Islamic and colonial/modern art is less contentious. This is partly because Islamic art was relatively easily assimilated into European aesthetics and did not raise the same issues of misrepresentation as Hindu art did. Nonetheless, if one were to detect a new development in Islamic art scholarship, this has been the move away from connoisseurship and stylistic analysis towards a more contextual approach that takes into account the political, social, and cultural implications of artistic production. The most significant development in this sphere has been the tracing of links between architecture and political ideology, especially in the Mughal empire. There have also been advances in another area of research that is of considerable significance. Contrary to earlier writings, we now know that Islamic architecture and painting were not simply imposed upon the indigenous population by the conquering powers. Indeed Islamic architecture was introduced into India long before the establishment of Muslim rule in the thirteenth century. Also, Gujarati painters, working under Hindu and Jain rulers, steadily absorbed Persian and Mamluk elements in the wake of trade partnership between the Gujaratis and the Arabs. The focus in the Islamic section is on the social and cultural implications of Mughal painting and architecture as expressions of an urban milieu that was emerging in the Mughal empire, addressing in particular the ideological underpinning that culminated in the Mughal theory of kingship.

The final section covering colonial and contemporary art and architecture considers issues of globalization and modernization as they make their gradual appearance on the subcontinent. I focus in particular on the impact of westernization on Indian artists and patrons during the Raj and subsequent nationalist resistance to colonial academic art, a period documented in my work on colonial art and national identity. An important aspect of the period is the self-image of Indian artists confronted with colonial rule. Moreover, during the nationalist period from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, western orientalist ideas of a national art were ‘invented’ by the Indian artists in creating their own form of artistic resistance. International artistic modernism overtook the subcontinent in the 1920s and grew in strength in the postcolonial period. The works of Indian artists even today naturally reflect the tension between global modernism and national self-definition that goes back to the colonial era. A significant development since the last decades of the twentieth century has been the growing importance of contemporary women artists of South Asia, who offer us an alternative vision of art.

Indian Art seeks to highlight exciting new research in the field, while putting the material in a clear theoretical framework. This framework, which probes the interaction between artistic production...
and patronage, and between individual creativity and dominant ideology, serves as a corrective to colonial art history. Perhaps more than any other non-European artistic tradition, the study of Indian art is soaked in western art historical concepts that reflect an obsession with the influence of the West on Indian art, ideas that neglect the role and function of art in the Indian society itself.

A key objective is to redress the imbalance that many general books on Indian art seem to suffer in that they tend to give undue importance to Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain artistic achievements to the detriment of Islamic and colonial/modern arts. As far as possible, I have tried to give equal importance to the three main periods of Indian history, bringing out the distinct flavour of each period. Hindu art in particular has suffered considerable misrepresentation in the West, a colonial legacy to which contemporary Indian scholars were not necessarily immune. Much Maligned Monsters belongs to an emerging intellectual revolution in the 1970s that questioned the claimed 'objectivity' of western knowledge of non-western cultures. Indian Art hopes to make a contribution to this continuing debate.

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Introduction

A cultural map of the Indian subcontinent

At the end of the British Raj in 1947, the Indian subcontinent was partitioned into the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. In 1971, Pakistan's eastern wing became the independent state of Bangladesh. Though using Indian Art as the title of this book, I wish to remind readers of the shared culture of the subcontinent in which Islam has played a major role. This shared culture has a historical validity that transcends modern national boundaries. Thus no art history of the subcontinent can afford to exclude the arts of Pakistan and Bangladesh. As the Pakistani art historian Akbar Naqvi writes with some passion, the 'political destinies of Pakistan and India may be different, and the two may quarrel politically, but the cultural ties are too old and archetypal to be forgotten or severed for political expediencies'. I have, however, excluded Sri Lanka and Nepal from this survey. While they have many features in common with India proper, their histories are so removed from that of India that they cannot be meaningfully included.

India is a multicultural subcontinent resulting from a history of migrations of diverse peoples and the establishment of new communities. They came from as far afield as Greece and Asia Minor in the west and the borders of China in the east. The newcomers, often arriving as invaders, carrying their cultural baggage with them, were gradually absorbed into Indian culture. These constant infusions enriched the culture, even as the settlers' own values were powerfully modified by India. Once assimilated, the heterogeneous strands melded into what was unmistakably Indian. Regional differences have led some authors to dismiss India as a modern invention. But there is no contradiction between the diversity of regions, religions, castes, and languages and the unity of shared experiences that at once separates India from the surrounding countries. One is forcefully reminded of the passage in the Bible that admirably captures Indian pluralism: "In my Father's house are many mansions."
Early art

Art generally means sculpture and painting, and often includes architecture, but human artefacts may embrace a wider category of material remains that includes the decorative and minor arts, such as jewellery, pottery, metal and wooden utensils, and even toys. The artefacts of the earliest inhabitants of India, the stone age societies, go back many millennia: rock paintings of central India used different pigments to depict humans and animals, neolithic pottery was ornamented with natural and geometric patterns, while terracotta figurines suggest the universal cult of the Great Mother. These arts, which continue to this day, have traditionally been regarded as elements of folk culture that have existed alongside ‘high’ art and enriched it.

Around 2500 BCE, the urban culture of Harappa sprang up in the north-west of India along the Indus river, continuing down to the west coast. At its cultural hub were the centrally planned cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, which boasted straight, wide roads and affluent private residences with bathrooms served by a drainage system. The poor, however, lived huddled in slums, the inevitable underclass in a

hierarchical system. Until the Indus script is deciphered, its people will remain an enigma to us, though the different skull types are found to be similar to those of present day Indians. The Harappans traded with the Mesopotamians but did not share their fondness for colossal images [1]. Stone carvings of what appear to be genitalia at Indus suggest the prevalence of sexual cults. The image of a male with erect penis, apparently wearing a buffalo mask with horns, seated in a ‘yogic’ position, and surrounded by animals, recalls the later Hindu god Siva. However, scholarly opinion is divided on this.

From Vedic sacrifice to religions of salvation

The Indus cities declined and were possibly abandoned around 1800 BCE. The earlier view that they were destroyed by the invading Indo-Aryans has lost favour, and ecological change has emerged as a strong contender. Rather than invading, Indo-Aryans were migrating to India in successive waves from around 3000 BCE. A pastoral people, they lived on the banks of the five great rivers of the Punjab, requiring neither temples nor images but simply a square altar for the fire sacrifice (yajna) that invoked the gods of the elements. These invocations were collected as the four Vedas, the most sacred Hindu texts. The Vedas are the mainstay of our knowledge about the society, for very little material evidence of the culture exists. Vedic society revolved around the priest (yajaka), who performed yajna for the patron (yajaman). Gradually, through interactions between the indigenous population and the newcomers, the society evolved into four great classes (varna)—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra—said in one of the four texts, the Rg Veda, to emanate from the body of the Creator. These rankings laid the foundations of the caste (jati) system in India. Untouchables and those who led a life of renunciation were not included.

Apart from pottery we have little evidence of art until the third century BCE. Colonial art historians claimed to trace its origins in western classical art. However, art appears not because it is imposed from the outside but because of the internal needs of a society. Architecture, for example, a ‘spatial’ art, creates domestic and public spaces. Public architecture and sculpture in ancient India, as in many other pre-modern civilizations, was created to satisfy religious needs. Faith alone, without the material wherewithal, could not realize such ambitious projects. There is a complex interaction between patronage and social institutions, and between artistic tradition and individual creativity, a phenomenon which Bourdieu aptly calls ‘the field of cultural production’.

One of the problems of studying ancient Indian artists is their relative anonymity, commensurate with their artisan status. Only exceptionally did artists publicly declare their authorship. Such an exception was Narasobba, an eighth-century artist, who
Religious background

Intellectual revolution followed the rapid urbanization of the second millennium BCE, as the fire sacrifices of the Vedic (Indo-Aryan) culture was challenged by thinkers who speculated on the nature of religion. In search of salvation, they confronted the profound mystery of death, their quest predicated on two cardinal principles: samsara, or reincarnation, and karma (karma), the individual's position in samsara as determined by his or her past actions. This ideology of moral force bearing the seeds of future good or bad fortune became the cornerstone of the Indian caste system. The Upanishadic texts (c. 1000 BCE) proposed that our souls (atman) are part of the great universal consciousness (brahma). Delusion (maya) arising from worldly existence makes us forget this unity. The notion of unity, advaita (non-dualism), has dominated Indian thought, while the search for spiritual knowledge has involved meditation (yoga), austerity (tapas), and renunciation. Buddhism, the first world religion, and Jainism, which had a limited but enduring appeal, were the two major developments of this intellectual revolution. The prince Gautama (c. 563–483 BCE) was named the Buddha (Enlightened One) after attaining illumination. His message was that sorrow was unavoidable because one craved for things that perished. To Buddhists, only nirvana, the end of consciousness, could end the sorrow. Yet it was not the forbidding nirvanah but the Middle Path—a life of good conduct and compassion through balancing extreme indulgence and painful renunciation—that became the Buddhist creed. Buddhism surged through India, as Brahmanical rituals failed to keep pace with change. Many of its first converts were Vaisyas (merchants), upwardly mobile, affluent urban groups, and women, both of whom wanted to overcome their low ritual status, but even Brahmin youths flocked to the order.

claimed that he had no rival in temple and house building. Thus we are reduced to inferring individual creativity mainly from the works of art themselves. The danger here lies in making judgements beyond our own time and culture that can distort the original aims of those who produced these works and their patrons.
Early Buddhist art
The earliest Indian religion to inspire major artistic monuments was Buddhism, the first creed to enjoy the patronage of a thriving community, express a clear ideology, and boast an efficient monastic organization. Buddhist monuments were great human endeavours inspired by faith and creative imagination. By the first millennium BCE, Vedic society in the Punjab was breaking up, as the population pushed east along the course of the Ganges, clearing forests and settling on the fertile land. Cities emerged as centres of trade and commerce, populated by prosperous merchants who were served by artisan guilds living close to urban centres. Money, as a form of exchange, and writing gradually made their appearance in this society. The political map of India was changing, pastoral communities giving way to early states called mahajanapadas as tribal republics fell before ambitious monarchs competing for control over North India. The situation was aptly described in the epic Mahabharata as one ‘where big fishes ate little fishes’. The state of Magadha in the north-east, controlling the river trade, forests, and rich deposits of minerals, ultimately emerged as the nucleus of the first Indian empire.

Asoka and the empire of compassion
The emperor Asoka (c.269–232 BCE) was the first major patron of Buddhist art. He succeeded his grandfather, Chandragupta Maurya (322–297 BCE), who had brought the whole of North India under his control by overthrowing the unpopular Nanda dynasty. He created the cosmopolitan Mauryan empire, which was run by an efficient centralized bureaucracy. Asoka, who inherited the vast empire, made a dramatic conversion to Buddhism which led to an experiment unique in human history. Shocked at the carnage attending his conquest of Kalinga (present-day Orissa), Asoka became a Buddhist and a pacifist, admonishing his subjects to practise compassion and ethical behaviour. The code of behaviour (dharma) propounded by him also showed political astuteness in inculcating social responsibility in a heterogeneous empire where tensions between urban merchants and Brahmin orthodoxy threatened stability. Asoka, who inscribed his
message on rock faces and stone pillars in public places throughout his empire, comes across as refreshingly human.

Mauryan artisan guilds, mentioned in literature, were engaged in Asoka’s projects. The high polish of Asokan pillars, lotus bell capitals, and stylized lions [2] had suggested to scholars, such as Vincent Smith in 1930, that Iranian journeyman carvers came to Asoka’s cosmopolitan empire in search of work after the fall of the Achaemenids. From this evidence Smith confidently ascribed Persian-Hellenistic origins to Indian art.” In 1973, John Irwin challenged this ‘colonial’ hypothesis. He suggested firstly that not all ‘Asokan pillars’ belong to Asoka’s reign: he might have simply adapted many of the existing pillars for his own imperial ends. Secondly, while the four lions are influenced by Persian art, bulls and elephants are treated with a lively observation that is unmistakably Indian. Again, the honeysuckle and acanthus motif, which at first sight seems adopted from Western classicism, was no more Greek than Indian. It belonged to the ancient west Asian artistic pool that nourished both ancient Greece and India. Finally, Irwin maintained that in order to discover the true origins of these pillars, it is more useful to look beyond their style to their function. In short, rather than initiating monumental art in India, Asoka made imaginative political use of a much older pillar cult symbolizing the

axis mundi (the pillar as the symbolic representation of the axis on which the world spins).

Buddhist patronage and the monastic order

Buddhist art and architecture
recognition of all the faiths within the kingdom. Indeed, as we shall see, tensions arose where kings used royal temples as a form of political legitimization when the temples themselves belonged to communities rather than to monarchs. These tensions are reflected in the fact that sometimes members of a royal family were very active patrons although the ruler himself was not. Sacred buildings or images were often endowed in India by individuals to gain religious merit, and these included kings in their personal capacity as devotees.

Buddhism, the first Indian religion to require large communal spaces, inspired three major types of architecture: the stupa, the vihara, and the caitya. Between the first century BCE and the first century CE, major Buddhist projects were undertaken with subscriptions raised from the whole community. Generous donations were made by landowners, merchants, high officials, common artisans, and, above all, monks and nuns, many of them belonging to emerging social groups in search of an identity. It is remarkable that women from all walks of life, including courtesans, were drawn to Buddha’s teaching. Did women and the lower svarna play a more active role in Buddhism because they were debarred from Brahmanic rituals?

The Great Stupa at Sanchi
The early stupas, which preserved the Buddha’s relics, were the first monuments to symbolize the power and magnificence of the faith. Originally the focus of a popular cult of the dead, the stupa celebrates the Buddha’s parinirvāna, the central message of Buddhism, and also symbolizes his eternal ‘body.’ Unlike the early stupas at Bharhut and Stupa II at Sanchi, the Great Stupa at Sanchi has survived intact, offering us first-hand knowledge of the aims and achievements of early Buddhist architecture. Situated on a major trade route near the city of Vidisa (Madhya Pradesh), Sanchi came to be a great sacred site and was visited by Asoka, who is commemorated on the East Gate of the

Great Stupa. By the first century CE, the Great Stupa had been enclosed in brick and stone slabs, plastered over, and possibly painted white and its ornamental gateways were completed.4

Around a thousand small donors, including some 200 women (among them the nun Buddhapalita), funded this remarkable stupa, its scale and artistic richness bearing witness to the organizational efficiency and considerable resources of the monastic order.5 However, the cost of the decoration of the gateways was borne by 11 major donors. Generosity (dana) was raised to the level of a sacrament in Buddhism, instilled through the popular story of Prince Vessantarā [3]. Among the donors at Sanchi were the ivory workers from the nearby town of Vidisa who carved the details of the gateways as an act of piety. But the overwhelming evidence is that in ancient Indian architecture (called strādharā, literally builder-carpenter), masons, stoneworkers, and sculptors were professionals who undertook religious projects regardless of their own religion, a phenomenon seen throughout Indian history. If ancient Indian art and architecture were expressions of profound faith, this was mainly the faith of the patron, not necessarily of the craftsman.

The stupa’s crowning glory is the set of four sandstone gateways, their festive sculptures providing a dramatic foil to the unadorned hemispheres [4]. The sculptures remind us of wood or ivory carving, as in the Indian ivory statuette found in the Roman town of Pompeii, which was buried in lava in 79 CE. In each gateway of the stupas, three uprights and architraves, with coiled ends resembling the unfurling of scrolls, rest on thick rectangular pillars. Tiratana motifs, the three Buddhist jewels—Buddha, the Doctrine, and the Order—are placed
at the pinnacle of the gateways (toranas). The most significant decorations are the central narrative panels, surrounded with a host of human, animal, geometric, and plant motifs, among them the earliest female nudes—the schema embodying a hierarchy of meaning implicit in Indian sacred decoration [5]. Espeically sensitive are the renderings of water buffaloes and elephants that mingle in a magic world with human-headed lions and many-hooded king cobras (nagas), reiterating the Buddhist belief in the unity of life. The Sanchi artists revel in forest scenes and towns with buildings containing balconies, vaulted roofs, and moats, offering us a wealth of information about contemporary life not found before."

Visual stories: the Sanchi reliefs

If the actual construction of the stupa was left to professionals, the narrative programme shows a unifying vision that was almost certainly provided by the monastic order, the guardians of the Buddhist canon. The pilgrims were introduced to the basic tenets of their religion represented on the front and the rear of the gateways, the sculptures providing spiritual lessons in an age of limited literacy. Around 60 major themes chosen from the Buddhist canon can be reduced to two types: jatakas, the stories of the former animal and human lives of the Buddha, paradigms of the Buddhist pilgrim's progress towards an enlightened state, and the life of the historical Gautama who attained Buddhahood [6].

It is curious that at Sanchi and other early monuments the historical Buddha was never represented as a human being. As the French orientalist Alfred Foucher argued in 1911, early artists used a specific symbol to suggest each 'station' in Buddha's spiritual journey, the pipal tree standing for his Enlightenment, the wheel for his First Sermon, and the stupa for his final parinirvāna. Yet Buddha images became a commonplace by the second century CE. This change from the 'aniconic' to the 'iconic' phase in Buddhist art has been one of the most contentious issues in Indian art history (see box). The late appearance of the Buddha image has been variously explained on stylistic and doctrinal grounds, firstly by Foucher. Recent research has discovered early literary references to Buddha images, thus fuelling a new controversy, led by Susan Huntington."

The Sanchi reliefs offer us the first narrative devices employed in ancient Indian art [3]. On the three central panels of each gateway an
The Buddha Image Controversy

Susan Huntington rejects the French orientalist Alfred Foucher's hypothesis of 1911 that the first Buddha images were 'iconic', or not represented in human form, since Buddha images are mentioned in the earliest Buddhist literature. Hence the stupas, the wheel, and the pipal tree in early stupas were not symbolic depictions of Buddha's life but simply reliquary compartments at pilgrimage sites. Vidya Deheja, who disagrees, holds that emblems such as the stupa are not mere relics. Because of their capacity for multiple reference, they serve to remind the viewer of the stages in Buddha's life as well as the sites where these events took place. While Huntington convinces us that a number of instances of the pipal tree, the wheel, or the stupa at Sanchi represent relic worship, the following scenes strongly suggest biographical episodes: the divine incarnation of Maya, Gautama's mother; Gautama's departure from home (depicted at Sanchi by the 'riderless horse'); but the Great Stupa at Amaravati shows both an early relief with the riderless horse and a later one with the Buddha on horseback; and the Buddha walking on the waters of the river Narañjana. It would indeed be curious if early Buddhists worshipped the Buddha's relics but not himself, whose personal charisma had moved thousands. Nonetheless, the absence of the Buddha image at Sanchi remains a baffling mystery.

essentially 'pictorial' technique was adopted, for instance the suggestion of recession by placing distant figures above and behind the foreground ones. These panels anticipate the preference of Indian sculptors for relief carving, rather than making free-standing figures. Even fully rounded figures, such as the yakshi at Sanchi, are meant to be seen as 'three-dimensional' only from the front or from behind, but appear flat if they are seen from the side. The relief form gave an opportunity to create large narrative scenes full of movement and an overarching rhythm, the sculptural groups forming part of the monumental stonework. The sense of movement in Indian art, very different from the static notion of perfection in classical Greek and Roman art, is often lost in a museum, where Indian sculptures are displayed as isolated fragments divorced from their contexts.

Any artistic representation must resolve the problem of time. The well-known mode in art history, deriving from Greek sculpture, is the representation of the significant moment, in which a dramatic action is 'frozen'. At Sanchi, several narrative conventions were adopted. The story could be told either in a sequence within a single frame or in a continuous narrative. The famous Fessantara Jataka uses a continuous narrative that flows from the front through to the back. Another technique is a 'repetitive' device suggesting progression, seen in the Battle for the Relics of The Buddha (south gate, back, middle architrave), one of the most dramatic scenes at Sanchi. The central panel depicts the impending battle with chariots, elephants, and foot soldiers in readiness, the town serving as a backdrop. The tumult is captured by subordinating the individual figures to an overall rhythm; next to it is the scene of kings exchanging relics amicably among themselves. Vidya Deheja identifies the Monkey Jataka at Sanchi as a further, 'synoptic'

mode: multiple episodes, presented within a frame, are held together by a single central representation of the main character in the plot.3

Buddhist Monasteries

One of the three jewels of Buddhism, the Buddhist monastic order, which was organized on a large scale, required commensurate living quarters. From the time of the Enlightened One, the order and the lay followers developed a relationship of mutual dependence. Monks and nuns, shunning worldly possessions, survived on the generosity of the laity. They repaid this by offering religious lessons to the faithful, who gained merit through materially supporting the order. Monasteries were founded as centres of Buddhist learning near prosperous towns and on sites hallowed by association with the Buddha. They grew into vast establishments, as at Sirkap in Gandhara or at Nalanda in Bihar. By 100 BCE, vibharas and caityas, hewn out of the living rock, began competing with constructed ones, partly on account of their durability.

Between 120 BCE and 400 CE, over a thousand vibharas and caityas were built in the Buddhist monastic complexes along ancient trade routes in the Western Ghat mountains. These sites evolved from the haphazard placing of buildings to their systematic planning. The vibara was a dwelling of one or two storeys, fronted by a pillared veranda. The monks' or nuns' cells were arranged around a central meeting hall, each cell containing a stone bed and pillow and a niche for a lamp. In contrast to such austerity, caityas, or halls for congregational worship, were second in splendour only to stupas. Merchants and members of the monastic order endowed the caityas generously, though small donations soon dried up in favour of fewer, larger endowments. The Focus of veneration within the caitya was a replica stupa, placed at the end of the prayer hall. Later, at Ajanta for instance, a Buddha image embellished the front of the stupa. Circumambulation, hitherto performed in the open air at stupas, was incorporated into the U-shaped plan of the caitya: two rows of pillars separated the narrow corridors on either side of the main hall, thus creating a path which continued behind the replica stupa.

As with much ancient Indian art and architecture, most of the caityas cannot be firmly dated and thus pose problems for the study of their evolution. In an attempt at a solution, the pioneering historian James Ferguson applied the concept of evolution from the simple to the complex to these monuments. However, Ferguson's own classical taste led him also to conclude that the earlier and simpler the architecture, the better it was. Ferguson's chronology, which is still in use, seriously distorts our understanding of Indian architecture. But if we take early Buddhist architecture as technically, if not 'aesthetically', simple, we can then trace evolution in terms of greater complexity and sophistication, as builders became more experienced. (However, the
The open façade, which allows a full view of the interior, is as yet without the distinctive stone window (citra). In the interior, the pillars are plain octagons having neither a base nor a capital, all of which indicates its rudimentary character. The imitation of wooden beams and other elements in stone suggests the human tendency to retrace forms that lost their function, a phenomenon best described as the persistence of memory.

A handsome stupa rises at the corner end of a colonnaded hall. Rows of robust Pillars with capitals that support couples riding on animals on either side separate the main hall from the katha or ambulatory corridor. The slight gap between the pillars and the 46-foot-high curved ceiling reinforces the impression of the lofty vault of heaven. However, the grandeur of the interior is created less by size or height than by the proportions of the architectural parts, a distinct feature of Indian architecture.

Later Buddhist art

Buddhist icons
The representation of the human form of the Buddha, one of the most enigmatic developments in Buddhism, changed the course of narrative art in India. When European archaeologists found the first classically inspired Buddha images at Gandharan in north-western India in the 1870s, they associated them with the Indo-Greeks who ruled the region in the first century BCE. The discovery led Foucher to conclude that the Buddha image was invented by the Greeks, thus prompting an artistic revolution in India. His conclusion followed from his argument that at Sanchi and other early sites the Buddha was represented symbolically. This assertion was challenged in 1916 by the nationalist art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, who cited a different set of Buddha images produced in the same period at Mathura. As he showed, these were inspired by the indigenous yaksha cult that owed little to western classical art. However, modern research has overtaken such purely stylistic explanations of the Buddha image, although the date of its origin continues to be hotly debated.

To follow the implications of the latest research, we need to examine the history of the period. After the break-up of Asoka's empire in the second century BCE, regional dynasties came to prominence, while the different centres of Buddhism gained in importance, notably Gandhara in the north-west. Since the time of the Persian conquest Gandhara's fortunes had been interlocked with those of Bactria (the region between present-day Afghanistan and
Tadzhikistan), a cosmopolitan area populated by Persians, Greeks, Scythians, and Parthians. After the fall of the Mauryas, Alexander's successors ruled Gandhara for a while. The Indo-Greek king Menander (c. 140–110 BCE) was almost certainly a Buddhist, as suggested by the famous Discourses of Menander.

Hellenistic art followed Alexander's footsteps from Asia Minor through Iran to central Asia, reaching Gandhara under the Indo-Greek rulers. Not only were classical orders deployed in the buildings of Taxila, the capital of Gandhara, but examples of the minor arts of the classical world—stone palettes, gold coins, jewellery, engraved gems, glass goblets, and figurines—poured into the region in the wake of Roman trade. The region imported Chinese lacquer and South Indian ivory with equal enthusiasm. Furthermore, the ivory figure from Pompeii shows that trade also flowed westwards. The Roman historian Pliny the Elder complained bitterly of Rome's being drained of gold because of an unfavourable balance of trade with India.

In the first century CE, the region came under the sway of the Kushan empire. The far-flung territory of Kanishka (c. 78–121 CE), covering an area from Mathura in north-central India through Gandhara-Bactria up to the borders of China, helped to disseminate Buddhism. Kanishka, its greatest champion since Asoka, became renowned as the patron of the Buddhist intellectual Asvaghosa. Kanishka convened the fourth Buddhist Council at Kashmir and was associated with one of the largest stupas in Afghanistan. Kanishka's reputation as a Buddhist and his trade with Rome led scholars to believe that Gandhara Buddhas originated in the Kushan empire and were of Roman inspiration. Although some revisionist scholars now believe that Hellenistic Gandhara Buddhas were the first to be created, as early as the first century BCE, it was only in Kanishka's empire in the first century CE that one finds large numbers of Buddha icons [9]. During Kanishka's reign, an alternative Buddhist tradition arose at Mathura, a great religious centre. One of the earliest Buddha images found here was that dedicated by the monk Bala [10]. Gandhara and Mathura Buddhas, hitherto regarded as culturally inimical to one another, appeared within the same empire.

If both Gandhara and Mathura Buddha images were created in the Kushan empire, how then can we explain the shift from the aniconic to the iconic phase? Some scholars see the appearance of the Buddha icon in the doctrinal changes that followed the rise of Mahayana Buddhism (the doctrine of the Greater Vehicle) during Kanishka's reign. The reverence for the Buddha as having shown the way to salvation was rejected by the Mahayhanists in favour of the Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be), who postponed his own nirvana for the sake of suffering humanity. There are, however, objections to the hypothesis that this doctrine of the saviour figure gave rise to the Buddha icon. The Buddha was worshipped almost from his lifetime. Furthermore, Bala, mentioned above, was a Hinayana monk, a sect hitherto believed to be hostile to image worship. Even more interesting is the fact that the majority of early monks and nuns were sponsors of images. However, the fact remains that Buddha images became ubiquitous only during Kanishka's rule, when Mahayana had transformed the Buddha ideal. Also, the spread of devotionalism (Bhakti) in around the first century CE, with its emphasis on personal salvation, must have encouraged the use of icons. Finally, the concept of divine kingship prevalent among the Kushans may have encouraged the image of the Bodhisattva as a princely figure.

The Kushan sculptors established clear iconographic conventions for the Buddha and the Bodhisattva and for their mudras (language of hand gestures), one of the central ones being the dharmachakra
Standing Buddha dedicated by the monk Bāhi, Mathura, c.100 ce.

The great teacher in Mathura art is depicted in a transparent monk’s attitude with his right shoulder bare, offering reassurance with his right hand (now missing), while the left hand rests on his hip. The elegance of these heroic, oversize Bodhisattvas derives from the indigenous yaksha figures such as the one discovered at Paharpur in Uttar Pradesh.

The Great Stupa at Amaravati
While Buddha images were being fashioned in North India, the Great Stupa at Amaravati, founded in the Asokan period, was reaching its culminating phase. Amaravati was situated near the capital of the kingdom of Satavahana (in present-day Andhra Pradesh), whose prosperity was based on overseas trade, especially with Rome. The stupa owed its final splendour to the Mahayana monks, wealthy merchants, and a Satavahana queen. Rediscovered by British officials in the nineteenth century on the eve of its demolition, today it survives only in fragments. A happy accident, however, enabled us to marvel at the stupa even now. The surviving panels show different versions of the monument, offering a glimpse of what the stupa may have looked like. This ‘self-imaging’ process has always been an integral part of Indian architecture (see chapter 3). Even though we can never gain a totally accurate picture of the stupa, which evolved over a long period of time, we can at least form a clear impression of its basic design.

Its most noticeable difference from the Great Stupa at Sanchi is in the use of limestone sculptural reliefs to cover the entire dome, creating a shimmering, marble-like effect [11]. We can retrace the pilgrims' path as they entered the stupa through one of the gateways, after gazing in admiration at the roundels of the outer railing decorated with lotus motifs. Once inside the gate, the pilgrims read the sacred tales of Buddhism on the inner face of the railing as well as on the drum during their circumambulation [12]. Amaravati contains both early narratives without the human Buddha and those with his human form in the final stages of the stupa, allowing us to observe clearly the transition to the new mode. The drum allowed the creation of long narrative friezes, such as that depicting the Great Departure, now showing the Buddha as a human being.

prosaicata (the first sermon, symbolized by the turning of the wheel of the Law). Gandhara also initiated a new narrative mode, employing ‘the frozen moment’ of western art that relied on anatomical accuracy, spatial depth, and foreshortening. A rather striking use of western anatomy is to be found in the representation of the skeletal Buddha, whose emaciation was the outcome of his asceticism before his illumination. One must remember, however, that Gandhara made only selective use of western illusionism, melding Hellenistic, Roman, Indian, and Parthian elements. As opposed to Gandharan illusionism, Mathura developed an alternative 'shorthand' narrative mode for depicting Buddha's life.
The Gupta court

The period of the Gupta court (c. 320–467 CE) is generally regarded as the pinnacle of ancient Indian civilization. Founded by Chandragupta I in 320 CE in Bihar, the empire reached its zenith in the reign of Samudragupta (c. 335–76). The so-called Allahabad inscription details the emperor's conquest of North India and his humiliation of the southern rulers. Some of his gold coins, which portray him as a musician, offer us a glimpse of his personal taste. The Chinese pilgrim Faxian, who visited the empire in 439 CE, was impressed by the Pax Gupta: its stable regime, light taxes, and general sense of well-being.

The Gupta court in the fifth century was adorned by the legendary 'nine gems', including the astronomer and mathematician Aryabhata, who was the first human known to have calculated the solar year accurately, and Kalidasa, ancient India's greatest poet and playwright. Another contemporary, Vatsyayana, who composed the Kama Sutra for the young man about town (nagaraka), attests to the urbane way of life in the Gupta empire. A treatise on sexual pleasure, the Kama Sutra considers sex as only one aspect, though an essential aspect, of gracious living. Vatsyayana advises that the well-appointed leisure chamber for the cultivated should include not only musical instruments but also 'a painting board and box of colours'. Even more interesting is Vasudhara's commentary on Vatsyayana, the Sadanga (Six Limbs of Painting), dealing with proportion, expression, representation, colour, and other aspects of the art. A contemporary reference to Gupta images as being 'made beautiful by the science of cira' suggests the existence of aesthetic manuals. Drama and lyrical poetry, written in courtly Sanskrit, reached unprecedented heights. Indian ideas of beauty, especially of female beauty, received their canonical expression in literature and subsequently influenced the visual arts. Ambitious stupas, stūpas, and caityas continued to be raised all over India and beyond, as a complex network of Buddhist patronage stretched from
Asia Minor to China along the well-trodden Silk Route, nourished by a thriving international trade [13].

The Ajanta cave paintings
In the rock-cut monasteries at Ajanta in the Deccan, narrative painting had been developing over centuries, its most intense and final flowering occurring in the reign of Harisena of the Vakataka dynasty (c.460–77 CE). His officials and vassals and Buddhist monks commissioned 20 of the finest Mahayana Buddhist caves. After the collapse of the Vakataka kingdom following Harisena’s death, the caves were abandoned until they were rediscovered by the British in the nineteenth century. Literary evidence on Indian painting exists from the ancient period. In addition to the _Sadanga_, one notable work is the sixth-century iconographic text _Visnuharmottaram_, which gives details of landscape and other genres of painting. Fragmentary paintings have also survived at many sites including Ellora, Bagh, Badami, and later southern monuments. But only at Ajanta has enough evidence survived to give us an idea of the scope of ancient Indian painting. The walls of the viharas were utilized for large-scale paintings that were harmonized with surrounding polychrome sculptures and ceiling decorations [14, 15].

The artists at Ajanta revel in action, drama, and human emotions. The _jatakas_ and the Buddha’s life, hitherto realized only in sculpture, are now invested with a new freshness and wealth of detail. One notices the evolution of narrative art from Sanchi to Ajanta, its growing complexity and its deeper exploration of human emotions (as, for example, in the moving story of Nanda’s renunciation in Cave XVI), as well as its lively engagement with contemporary subjects and natural phenomena. Cave XVII is one of the most spectacular. The artists paint a storm at sea and a shipwreck in their treatment of the romantic tale _Simhala Avadana_. They also paint a panoramic battle scene, the only one known from ancient India. At Ajanta, even though whole walls are taken as the