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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**HISTORY OF ANCIENT INDIAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE – A STUDY**

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**Abstract**

Distinctive artistic activity in ancient India began with Harappan miniature art pieces. An art, monumental in conception and precise in execution is noticed in the Mauryan period. The native style of simplicity and folk appeal is best represented in the narrative Sunga art which forms a treasure house of fables, visually represented. The Kushana sculptures fostered a mixed culture with Graeco-Roman affiliation. The sensuous sculptural art that bloomed at Amaravati and Nagarjunikonda display mastery in detailed ornamentation. The human figure, the pivot of Gupta sculpture expressed a characteristically refined taste and charm. The synthesis culminated in the Pala-Sena period is a fusion of classical mannerism with the indigenous style of Bengal. The magnificent open air bas-relief sculpted out of rock at Mahabalipuram glorifies Pallava art. Casting of bronzes under the imperial Cholas was an age of refinement of Dravidian art. This innovation and creativity exerted lasting influence on the art movement that glorify our cultural past.

**Key words:** Art & Architecture, sculpture, relief, terracotta, bronze

**Introduction**

Art forms are expression of people belonging to different cultural and social groups. History of Indian art begins with the pre-historic cave paintings. <sup>1</sup>It is considered as an evidence of a creative explosion when the minds of ancient humans became fully developed. Generally speaking Indian art is an anonymous art, as the sculptor or the artist never sought to glorify himself. He always gave his best as a humble offering to his patron, the king or

exercised his imaginative impulse through his creations.

***Harappan Art***

The major era in the art history of India begins with the Bronze Age culture of Harappa. The Harappan culture blossomed as the first urban civilization of ancient India. Each of its facets was unique in artistic creativity and this developed a sculptural standard of exquisite beauty. Terracotta, a functional art is the first creative expression of human civilization. The word terracotta is derived from the Latin word “terra cotta”

which means “baked earth”. It refers to the primeval plastic material i.e. natural clay fired at low temperature. Terracotta has a characteristic rusty mud colour because of the presence of ferrous compounds in clay. The making of terracotta hardly involved any complex technical know-how or heavy financial involvement. They appeared in diverse form with simplicity of expression.

Stella Kramrisch, a pioneering interpreter of Indian art classified the terracotta objects into “timeless” and “time-bound” variety. The timeless varieties of terracottas are made by hand without using a mould. The clay is shaped by rounding off or flattening, by drawing into points and pinching, sometimes by incising lines and fixing pellets of clay in ‘applique method’. The timeless terracotta Mother Goddess from the Harappan sites is impressive examples of realism. They are represented as the progenitor of life and thus the worship of the Mother was considered paramount. She represented the power of generation, regeneration and the cycle of life. She was the symbol of fertility and began to be associated with arable land and thus worshipped by the farmers and the barren women who longed to give birth to a child. These Mother Goddess figurines from Harappan sites closely resemble the artistic creations of the Aegean world and those of the Hittites, Philistines and Phrygians.

Harappan seals, the tiny masterpieces of glyptic art, prove that the Harappans were masters in miniature art. They are very small in size but the carvings on it are exquisite and precise exhibiting supreme sense of designing. Most of them were made of steatite and a few in terracotta and other medium. The seals were used generally for commercial purposes but a few were also carried as amulets. By far the greatest numbers of the Harappan seals depict figures of bulls, either zebu or the ox with its heavy dewlap and wide curving horns. Although the iconography of the zebu motif cannot be properly identified, it appears likely that the popular bovine emblem is related to the cult of the bull, which in turn led to ‘Nandi’ and the worship of Shiva.

One of the most evocative seals from Mohenjodaro, depicts a deity with horned headdress and bangles on both arms, standing in a pipal (sacred fig) tree and looking down on a kneeling worshiper with hands raised in respectful salutation, prayer or worship. A human head rests on a small stool and giant ram and seven figures in procession complete the narrative. The ‘contest’ motif is one of the most convincing and widely accepted parallels between Harappan and Near Eastern glyptic art. A considerable number of Harappan seals depict a manly hero, each hand grasping a tiger by the throat. In Mesopotamian art, the fight with lions or bulls is the most popular motif and this depiction recalls the tale of the ‘The Epic of Gilgamesh’.

A remarkable seal from Mohenjodaro with buffalo-horned figure is identified by Sir John Marshall as Shiva in his form as Pashupati, lord of animals.<sup>2</sup> The figure of Shiva represented on the seal is ithyphallic. He has been portrayed as seated cross-legged, in Yogic ‘padmasana’. The wide arms of the image pointing towards the earth, the Yogic nature of the wide-lapped stance and the curved horns, transmit power and establish equilibrium. Natural enemies, wild and virile animals, buffalo, leaping tiger, rhinoceros and elephant all amicably surround the figure. The undeciphered script is arranged horizontally in the space above the headdress. Sculpture is, by far, the most expressive of plastic arts. It can be classified as sculptures in round with dimension and sculptures in relief where the sculpted elements remain attached to a solid background of the same material. Reliefs are traditionally classified into bas-relief and alto-relief according to how high the figures project from the background. Bas-relief is a technique in which the figural projection from the given plane or surface or background is slight and very delicate and alto-relief is in which the figural projection from the background surface is significant and notable.

Seated male sculpture of white, low-fired steatite, interpreted as a priest from Mohenjodaro (17.5 cm height, 11 cm width) is a remarkable piece of art. The upper lip of the figure is shaved and a short combed beard frames the face. He wears a plain woven fillet or ribbon headband with circular inlay ornament on the

forehead and similar but smaller ornament on the right upper arm. The two ends of the fillet fall along the back. The hair is carefully combed towards the back of the head. Two holes beneath the highly stylized ears suggest that a necklace or other head ornament was attached to the sculpture. The left shoulder is covered with a shawl decorated with trefoil designs that recalls the sculptures from Sumerian world. Elongated eyes are deeply incised and half closed as in a meditative concentration. A slight touch of Greek style of statues can be seen overall.

A bronze statuette 10.5 cm. (4.1 inches) high, hailing from Mohenjodaro in a standing position, was named 'Dancing Girl' with an assumption of her profession. This bronze art work found at Mohenjodaro shows more flexible features when compared to other formal poses. The girl is naked, wears a number of bangles and a necklace and is shown in a natural standing position with one hand on her hip. She wears a cowry shell necklace with three big pendants and her long hair styled in a big bun rests on her shoulder. This statue reflects the aesthetics of a female body as conceptualized during that historical period. Lost-wax casting, a sculpting technique used here is an elaborate process.

### **Mauryan Art**

After the Harappan Culture there is a surprising absence of art of any great degree of sophistication. As time passed the Mauryan period heralded a great landmark in the history of Indian art. This art is individualistic in its essential character and ideology.<sup>3</sup> Emperor Ashoka wanted to bring India into the orbit of international culture, so created an art different in aesthetic vision and tradition. The free standing isolated monolithic pillars about fifty feet high and weighed about fifty tones set up by him are perhaps the finest specimens of the remains of the Mauryan art. They represent a triumph of engineering, architecture and sculpture. Huge and entire pieces of fine grained sand-stones from Chunar were chiselled into the shape of these pillars. The wonderful life-like figures of the four lions standing back to back and the smaller graceful and stately figures of animals in relief on the abacus, all indicate a highly advanced form of art and their remarkable beauty, majesty and vigour.

The life size animal sculpture that crowns the Ashokan pillars has evoked admiration of the art critics. They are unique, monumental in conception and design and fine and precise in execution. The Basarh-Bakhira lion evidently marks the earliest stage. It is clumsy in appearance and to some extent crude in execution. The refinement and a feeling for linear rhythm is noticed in the Rampurva bull, lion from Lauriya Nandangarh and the Sarnath quadripartite. The manes of the lions are highly stylized and locks are treated in separate volumes. The facial expression is fanciful and the treatment of the veins and muscles exhibit power and authority. The Sarnath capital, our national emblem is an excellent example of ancient sculpture that successfully combines realistic modeling with ideal dignity and is finished in every detail with perfect accuracy. The animal figures depicted in Ashokan art are why and how far Buddhist is a matter of controversy. It is stated that after the tremendous blood-shed in the Kalinga war Ashoka became pacified and followed the path of non-violence as indicated by Lord Buddha. Thus the animals crowning the columns are somehow connected to Buddhism. The lion traditionally regarded as the king of the forest and the most powerful and majestic of all animals, has a specific meaning in the early Buddhist tradition. The Buddha was Sakya-simha, the lion of the tribe of the Sakyas. The Bodhisattva is born as a white elephant and also the Buddha is a tamer of elephants. The Buddha was born in the zodiac sign of a bull. The horse which apart from its role in the legend of the Great Renunciation, was, along with the elephant, regarded as another important symbol of royalty, of universal monarch, in both temporal and spiritual sense. The deer symbolizes the Masters Great Enlightenment at the Deer park of Sarnath. Therefore, these animals were each invested with a strong symbolical meaning in early Buddhist tradition.

One finest sculpture in round from Mauryan period is the *Chauri* (fly whisk) bearer or the Didarganj *Yakshi* from Patna. This highly polished voluptuous, tall and well-proportioned freestanding stone sculpture in round, shows sophistication in the treatment with round muscular body, round face with fleshy cheeks and sharp eyes, nose and lips. The folds of muscles are accurately defined. Every fold of the garment wrapping the legs are shown with protruding lines which creates a

transparent effect. Hanging beaded necklace and heavy ornaments adorn the feet. Heaviness in the torso is depicted by heavy breasts. The hair tied in a knot at the backs elegantly portrayed.

### ***Sunga Art***

Indian art was not meant to cater to the elite class only. To reach to a large audience who were not literate the narrative art appeared in the Sunga period. The art of the Buddhist stupa at Bharhut, now partially preserved in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, forms a treasure house of fables, visually represented. <sup>4</sup>It depicts Jataka stories of Buddha's previous birth and scenes from the Master's life. Buddha is never represented in human form in Buddhist art before the Christian era, as his spirituality was considered too abstract for the purpose. His presence in early Indian art and his spiritual journey, renunciation, meditation, and wisdom, are vividly portrayed in this art symbolically. In a medallion the gift of the Jetavana Park by Anatha Pindaka, covering the ground with golden coins before it was presented by the merchant prince, is most graphically represented in the Bharhut railings. Basically emphasis was given on elaboration of the flat surface and of frontality as distinct from 'perspective' presentation.

The native style, distinguished by its simplicity and folk appeal is best represented in the free standing flat smooth figures of Yakshas and Yakshinis that cling along the pillars, on the gate and railings of Bharhut stupa. The figure of Chulakoka Devata is a notable specimen of Sunga art representing its indigenous character and folk quality. Here no attempt is made towards facial expression, the body is without energy. She is a tree goddess and stands gracefully on an elephant with her arms and one leg entwined around a flowering tree. The profuse jewellery and the mode of wearing the under garment and the head-dress demonstrate the feminine fashion of the period.

### ***Kushana Art***

The Kushana rule in the North gave a new mode of expression to the creative genius of the contemporary artists. This period matches with the

blossoming of two major schools of Buddhist sculptures, those of Mathura (Uttar Pradesh, India) and Gandhara (Northwest Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan). The two schools are associated with the earliest anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha. They fostered a mixed culture which is best illustrated by the variety of deities with Greco-Roman affiliation. <sup>4</sup>The style of Kushana artworks is stiff, hieratic and frontal. It is the fusion of elements from Classical, Iranian, Central Asian, and Indian origin expressed into organic, heterogeneous productions that defines best the term 'Kushana art'. The creative epoch of the Gandhara, Graeco-Buddhist or Graeco-Roman School flourished during the Kushana dynasty under the patronage of Kanishka. The Gandhara region had long been a crossroads of cultural influences and was profoundly influenced by Greek methodologies.

### ***Gupta Art***

Assimilating the idiom of the Kushana age, the Gupta period ushered a brilliant epoch in the area of artistic creativity. <sup>5</sup>The art of this age bears an evidence of an established idiom inspired by a mystic philosophy and transcendental thoughts that gained appreciation through the ages. Sculptures executed in stone in particular set the norm of plastic art and the terracottas of the period conformed to that norm. Artists of the Gupta culture epoch gave equal emphasis on secular and religious subjects. The Guptas were staunch followers of different Brahmanical cults and as a result iconography of different divinities was standardized and cult images began to appear. The human figure is the pivot of Gupta sculpture. They express a characteristically refined taste and charm of the Gupta style. The soft and pliant human figures exhibit a free and easy movement. The Buddha figures from Sarnath and Mathura with their soft and pliant body prove to be infused with an inherent energy. The sculptural treatment here is more delicate. The facial features reveal supernatural and serene calmness. Resilient curves define the modelling and the physiognomical details vibrate a rhythm. The Gupta artists in order to emphasize the plastic subjects sensitively reduced all superfluities viz., elaborate drapery, ornamentation, coiffure etc. that conceal the

physical beauty. The wet or transparent drapery (magnamsuka) became the convention which no doubt enhanced the grace of the figure. What emerged was purely natural, free from over- elaboration.

### ***Pala-Sena Art***

The major dynasty after the Imperial Guptas was the Palas who came to power sometime in the middle of the eighth century. Pala-Sena art or Eastern Indian art, derives its origin from the late Gupta style. Not only the sculptural element but the basic features of the Pala School of Art were modified on the model of the Gupta style. The synthesis culminated here is a fusion of classical mannerism with the indigenous style of Bengal. This new style of art reflected the ideas of beauty, physical charm and sensuousness. They show over sensitive gestures and accurate linear composition. Most of the sculptures discovered in Bangladesh and West Bengal have been carved out of Rajmahal black basalt stone. The female principle as creative energy is dominant in the Pala-Sena sculptures. Here the female figures are shown with heavy round breasts and bulging hips. The male figures are shown with a massive body, broad shoulder moderately lessen to a narrow waist that suggests their disciplined vigour and strength.

### **Conclusion**

Indian architecture as it stands today, is a body of production that cannot easily be exemplified by the approaches, buildings and architects cited above. It has evolved over the centuries and has been affected by numerous invaders who have brought different styles from their motherlands. But it is an unavoidable fact that certain expressions tend to get magnified and others reduced when set against the vast canvas of the world. A more representative selection can occur only at a deeper level of study.

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