

Introduction to Indian Art – An Appreciation
Prof. Soumik Nandy Majumdar
Department of History of Art
Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

Module – 01
Wonder from the Classical Period: Ajanta Caves
Lecture: W3 – L1

Welcome viewers to MOOCs online course on Introducing Indian Art and Appreciation. This is the beginning of the 3rd week and first module. This 3rd week is titled as stylistic variations wherein we will be looking at various stylistic variations and stylistic innovations taking very specific examples of sculptures and paintings, across time from the main stream classical Indian art as well as the folk art traditions.

So, this is the first module of this 3rd week stylistic variations. The first module is dedicated to Ajanta, one of the supreme examples of Indian art undoubtedly.

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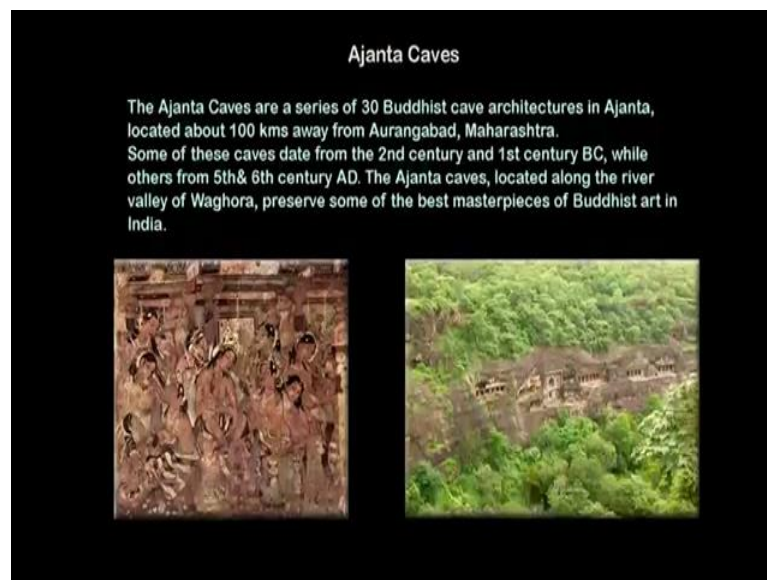


Now, Ajanta caves it is actually a series of caves about 30 carved out from a solid monolithic mountain body. That particular rock is not a soft rock, it is a hard stone known as the basalt rock. The entire location is located around or along the river valley Waghora in Maharashtra and today it looks like a very remote place, but perhaps when these caves were being carved out and when the monks the Buddhist monks started living in there and preaching, worshiping inside those caves.

Perhaps at that point of time these caves or this site was not so remote was perhaps part of a trade route because the river Waghora seems like it was a very navigable river unlike what it is today. Looking at the paintings and sculptures in Ajanta also give us a sense or it suggests that Ajanta caves were visited during the ancient times by people from many other places not just that locality, people from central Asia, Persia, North India, Eastern India even south India must have visited because the representations of figures from various nations and countries are visible in the paintings.

So we have hunts, that perhaps this location was not that remote as it looks like today.

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Now, Ajanta as I have already mentioned, Ajanta caves more particularly are a series of Thirty Buddhist caves and these are Buddhist cave architecture not natural caves. These caves have been (Refer time: 03:22) carved out from the solid rock mountain. Interestingly the activities the carving activities, architectural activities, the sculptures activities, the painting activities at Ajanta went on for several centuries may not be continuously, but it did go on for several centuries because some of the earliest a cave architectural examples and evidences at Ajanta are probably from second century and first century BC, whereas the latest examples of paintings, sculptures and architecture from Ajanta come from 5th, 6th and perhaps the beginning of the 7th century AD. Now we are not very sure whether this place was very active throughout these centuries.

According to some scholars the activity stopped at a certain point the place was perhaps abundant for a few centuries, then again a new generation of Buddhist monks occupied that place and started artistic activities over there. Whatever might be the reason this is true that, definitely true that artistic activities were Ajanta continued for several centuries.

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Now, the look is very interesting that when you approach Ajanta today when you start climbing up the stone cases, trying to reach the first cave at Ajanta which is not necessarily first cave historically or chronologically, but the first accessible cave at Ajanta. From outside it looks like this, a huge monolithic mountain, a huge body of mountain with small little niches and caves carved into the body of these mountains.

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But the real surprise awaits when we enter any one cave and find something like this. A gorgeous interior with beautiful pillars, very well decorated with impeccable designs and decorations carved out with only chisel and hammer. The entire architectural construction also seems to be done by very efficient architects with relief sculptural decorations on the surface and often with paintings.

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These caves are excavated in horse-shoe shaped bend of rock surface nearly 76 m in height overlooking a narrow stream known as Waghora. The location of this valley provided a calm and serene environment for the Buddhist monks who retreated at these secluded places during the rainy seasons. This retreat also provided them with enough time for furthering their religious pursuits through intellectual discourses for a considerably longer period. The caves were excavated in different periods (circa. 2nd century B.C. to 6th century A.D.) according to the necessity.

Each cave was connected to the stream by a flight of steps, which are now almost obliterated, albeit traces of some could be noticed at some places.

Though it is also true that we may not be fortunate to find paintings in all the caves, out of the 30 caves the only I think 1, 2 and cave number 9 and 10 from the early face, that is

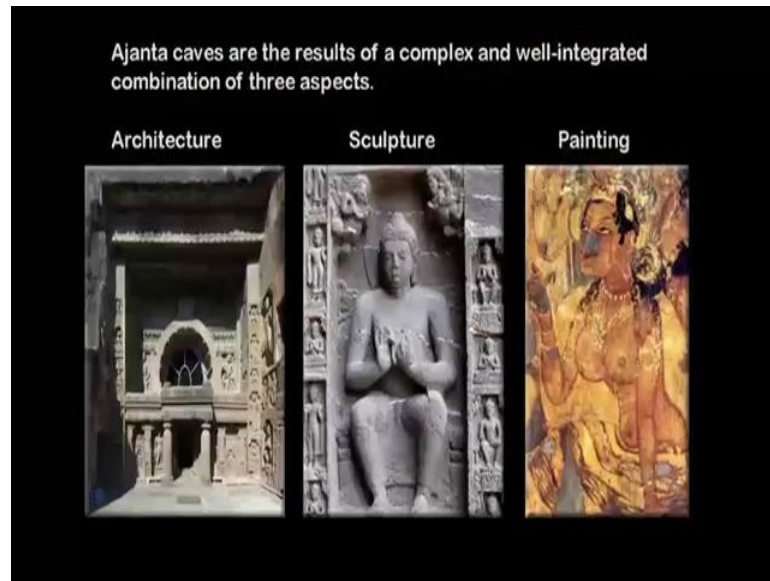
2nd century and 1st century BC, and from the 2nd face that is from the 5th, 6th, 7th century AD we have cave number 1, 2, 16 and 17. So, these are the 6 caves all together which have the maximum amount of paintings on their walls. Rest of the caves is also important either because of their architectural splendor or because of their sculptural beauty.

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Because the entire caves at Ajanta can be divided into two groups. There is one kind of caves which are called Viharas. Where you usually do not find any sculpture or painting or any embellishment, any decoration on the walls or pillars because Viharas are like dormitories, where monks use to stay, but then you also have a number of other kind of caves which are known as Chaityas. Chaityas are the caves where the monks and the Buddhist devotees and their followers and the preachers would come sit and pray and worship

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And these are the caves where you have maximum number of sculpture, architectural embellishment and painting. So, it is very interesting to experience of fantastic combination of architecture, sculpture and painting. These three activities, these three very specific kinds of works oven into one single project called Ajanta. This is one thing. Secondly, the contrast that you experience before you enter any cave and after you enter any one cave, is also very striking as I have already mentioned from outside Ajanta does not look very promising you really do not get any clue, what could be there inside the caves? But the moment you enter the caves

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This is what you see. Completely you get a transformed experience as if the interior of the cave has completely transformed itself into something very palpable, something aesthetically very rich, something that is very decorative in contrast with the exterior which is very hard, harsh and left to the nature, but inside the caves it is left to the artists. So, this is one example of Ajanta cave where you can see paintings almost everywhere except the floor.

You see paintings on the ceilings, on the walls and of course on the pillars along with the sculptural works. There are relief sculptures on the pillars; there are relief sculptures inside the niches and straight at the center deep inside the cave. You can already see the statue of Lord Buddha the main image, the iconic image for which we are here.

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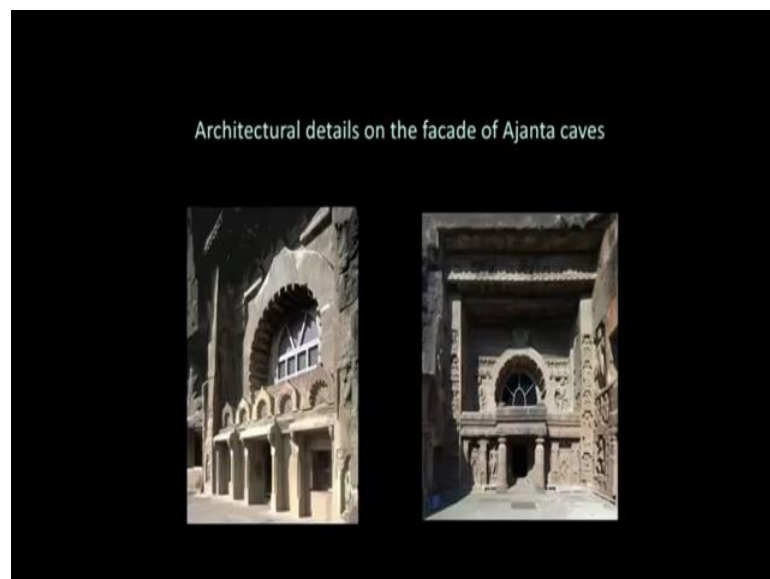
Then when you start looking at the various corners of the Ajanta caves, this is what you begin to find some small little images of Buddha or floral and decorative images on the ceiling, which almost looks like a prototype or a copy of a wooden ceiling. Though it is a stone ceiling and really speaking you need not copy a wooden prototype here the stone ceilings with the very, very solid pillars a strong enough to withstand and bear the load of the entire mountain, but never the less they had copied the typical wooden, beamed, architectural ceiling and as a result the painters got this wonderful opportunity of filling up the small little spaces or pockets with very interesting images.

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Then you have very interesting iconic images painted on the pillars of the Ajanta caves. Here also whether it is the ceiling or the pillars because of I guess the space that is available to the painters, they have generally gone for smaller images or compartmentalized images may be a series of Buddha or Buddhi Shaktas or floral decorations.

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But when they come to the wall, they would go for large narrative panel paintings. So, this is also very intelligent decision taken up by the sculptures and the painters and

architects jointly at Ajanta when they were into the activity. They are very clearly decided that if it is a pillar or a ceiling, we would go for smaller images, we would go for singular decorative or figurative images, but if it is a wall, side wall we would go for large narrative panel paintings because the space itself gives us the opportunity to go for that; hence, whereas on the pillars and on the ceilings you get Buddhist religious symbols and various kind of iconic images.

On the other hand on the side walls, on the panel paintings you get to see narrative paintings stories about the life of Buddha and stories from Jataka Tales. These are the two things that I have been elaborately narrated on the walls of the Ajanta panel. Now, before we move on to the paintings, let us take a pause and also look at, at least one or two examples of architectural details though people generally talk about painting when they referred to Ajanta because Ajanta painting is after all world famous. Ajanta painting is after all the classic example of Indian Classical Art.

Ajanta painting has reached undoubtedly the pinnacle of aesthetic richness in the context of ancient Indian art yet, we should not forget that at Ajanta neither of them I mean painting nor sculpture architecture stands independently. They are integrally connected with each other and one cannot be looked at forgetting the role that is played by the other. So, we have to really appreciate Ajanta painting in terms of its location, in terms of its composition. Then we need to also see how the entire planning of Ajanta painting has come up in relation to the architecture and in relation to the sculptural images found outside the caves as well as inside the caves.

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So, the very planning of Ajanta painting that where do you get and what kind of images you get is to a great extent determined by and influenced by the architectural design of the Ajanta caves. So, if it is a small little space, horizontal space right above the door way they would go for simple iconographic representation of Buddhas.

If it is a ceiling as I have already mentioned nobody would dare to go for a narrative painting, but if it is a wall there you have the opportunity to deal with narrative content elaborately because of wall space provides you that kind of opportunity and that kind of ambition.

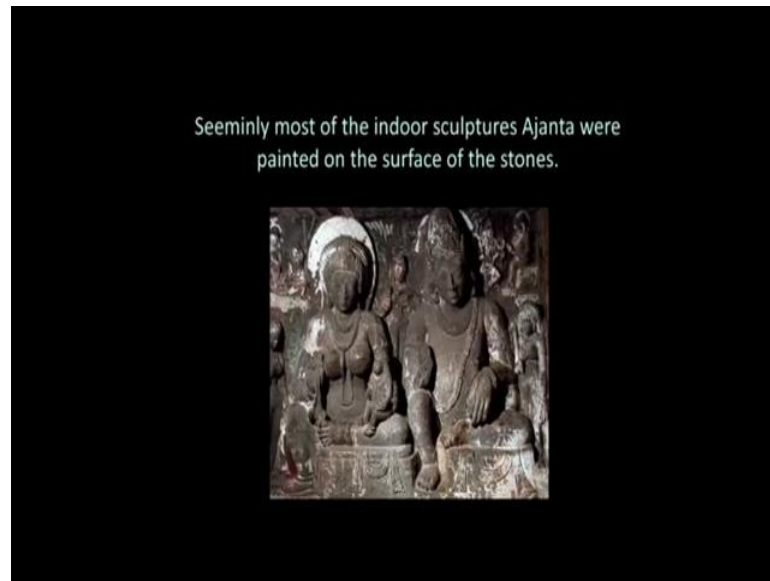
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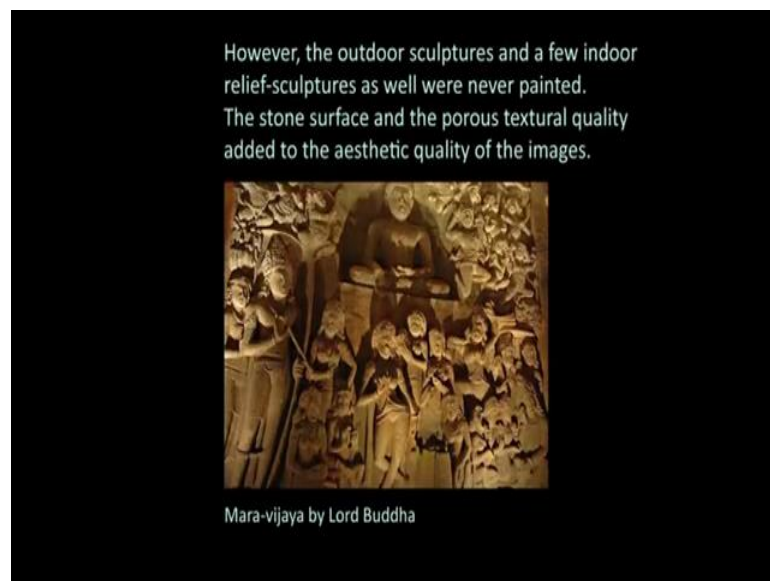
Now, one thing I would say in relation to or with reference to this integral relationship between architecture and painting that, very often at Ajanta we find traces of painting on the body of sculpture. Now this is very interesting though many of those painted layers have fallen off, they peeled off due to the ravage of time I guess, but still for example, when you look at this image you can still see traces of painting on the body of this sculpture.

So, this is another way of looking at this relationship between sculptural paintings at Ajanta where, many of the sculptures themselves were painted which is slightly unique. At Ajanta we also have sculptures without any painted layers completely dependent on the texture and the quality of its own stone.

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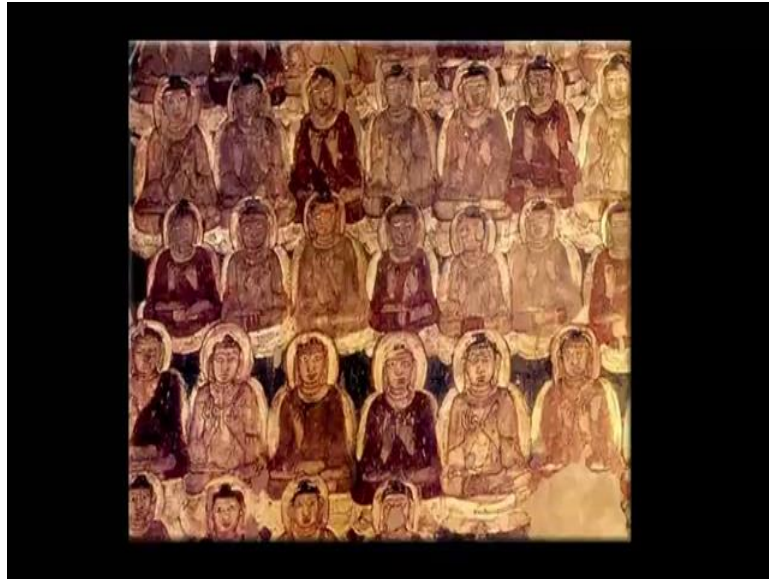


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So, it seems that many of the indoor sculptures at Ajanta were painted on the surface of the stones, but there are also outdoor sculptures and a few indoor relief sculptures as well which were never painted. The stone surface and the porous textural quality added to the aesthetic quality of the images.

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For example, this one we will come back to this sculpture again later on. As far as the painting of Ajanta concerned usually we talk about a classical style. After all when you are all looking at the 5th and 6th century Ajanta paintings at cave number 1, 2 and 16, 17; that period of course, coincides with the famous classical Gupta period in India. So, it is quite natural for us to expect some classical elements in Ajanta painting which were painted in this later phase.

But not all paintings at Ajanta have that classical feature. For example, this group of Buddhas which is a small detail of thousand Buddhas painted in one particular cave at Ajanta do not actually carry any visible sign of classical features.

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Whereas slowly as you keep looking at various other images, you can get to see in their posture, in the movement of their body, in the very curvature of their anatomy, in the rhythm of their anatomy certain classical features are getting very very evident.

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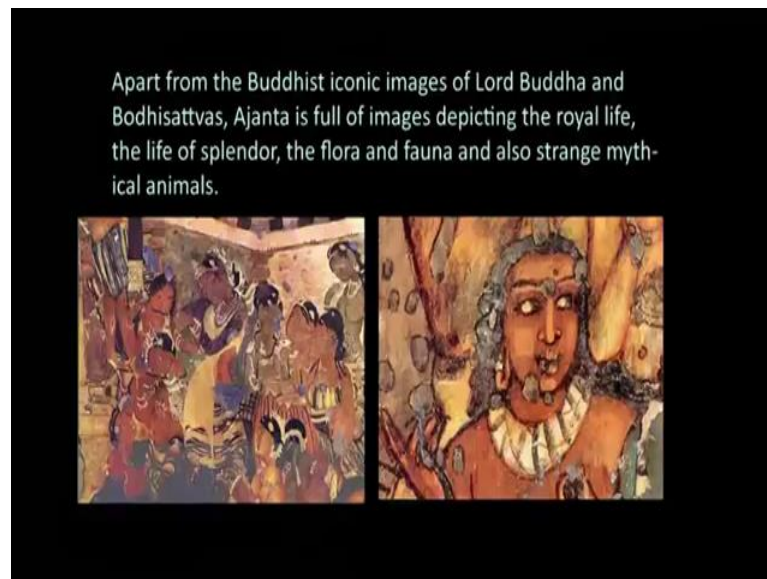


And finally, we talk about this very famous Bodhisattva Padmapani, which is supreme example of classical art in Ajanta.

Now, this particular figure has all the essential features of classical art, beginning with the Bhanga or the Bhangima which is a kind of a body posture which evokes a graceful

quality, the half closed eyes, the entire rhythm that has been kind of discovered with in this very perfect anatomical feature of this person and certain kind of spiritual quality. All this things in combination create what we understand as a classical style, but in order to achieve this style the painters must have gone through enormous practice, must have gone through a rigorous kind of training to understand conceptually, what is classical art and to achieve that physically in their painting and sculpture.

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Now, apart from the very typical Buddhist iconic images of Lord Buddha and Bodhisattvas, Ajanta is also full of images depicting the royal life the life, the common people, the life of the of a splendor the flora and fauna, the natural and the vegetal world and also strange mythical animals. So, on the one hand at Ajanta you find images very religiously following the iconic prescriptions and at the same Ajanta

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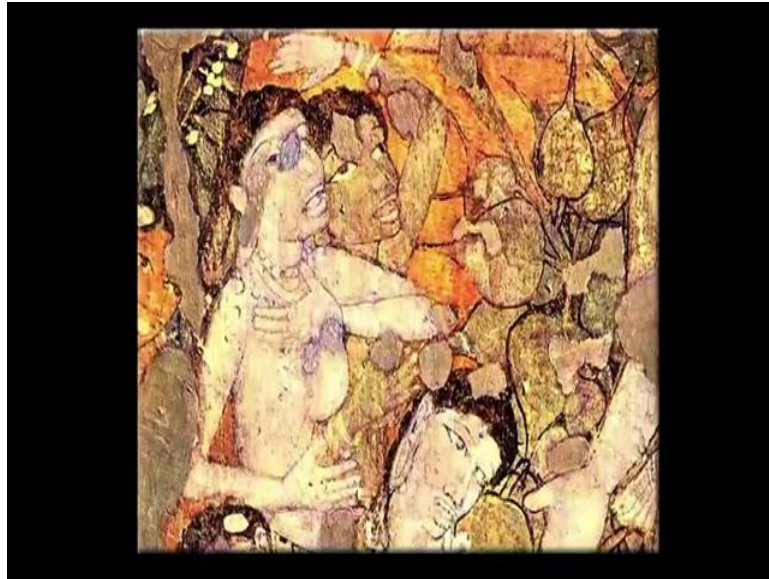
You also get to see images which are not so directly religious, but word about the life; both life of the royal people and life of the common people including the natural and the animal world.

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That is perhaps the reason why at Ajanta you get a huge number of images of birds, animals, trees, plants along with human figures.

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The other interesting aspect as far as the style of Ajanta painting is concerned, is the presence of different physiognomic features in Ajanta particularly, in the human figures in the human beings. So, on the one hand we are talking about a classical prototype which almost implies that all the Ajanta figures necessarily follow that prototype, but when you begin to look at the various Ajanta figures very carefully,

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Slowly you get to see that no, that is not the case. You might have different kinds of figures with different features; almost entirely distinctively different physiognomic

feature representing different races and clans depending on the narrative panel, depending on the context. Before we have a look at a few figures this is one little detailed from a ceiling painting at Ajanta, wherein you get to see the engagement of the painters with the natural world outside.

We cannot simply write them off as merely decorative motives, because when you look at the decorative motives particularly the floral motives at Ajanta, you will see that these are not mere patterns. There is a very real palpable and tangible connection between the painter and the vegetal world outside. Hence even within the decorative schema these images of flowers, plants, birds and animals they evoke the sense of the real. They look very soft, they look very tender they do not look like a pattern yet they are used for a decorative pattern.

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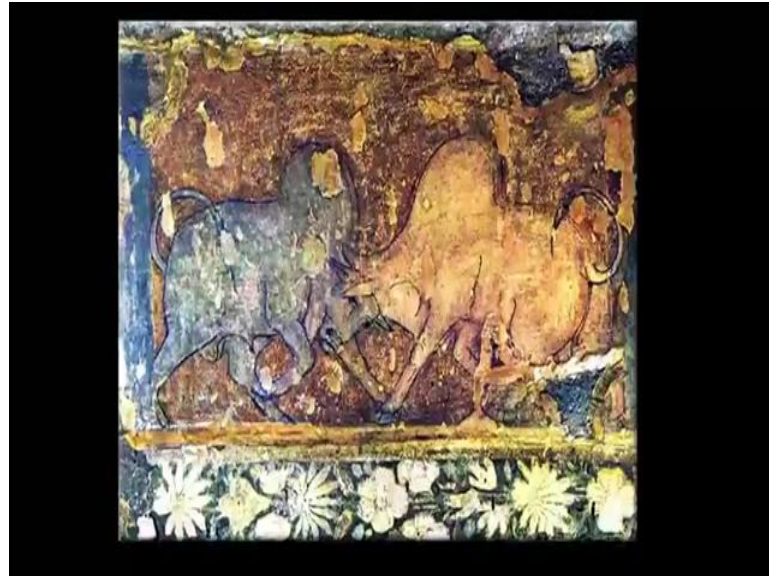


For example when you look at this elephant, now this particular image of this elephant is a part of, it is not part of any religious it does not have any religious connotation as per as this particular elephant in the given context is concerned. Yet the elephant has all the tenderness, softness and the anatomical naturalness in its body, in its contour line, even in its look.

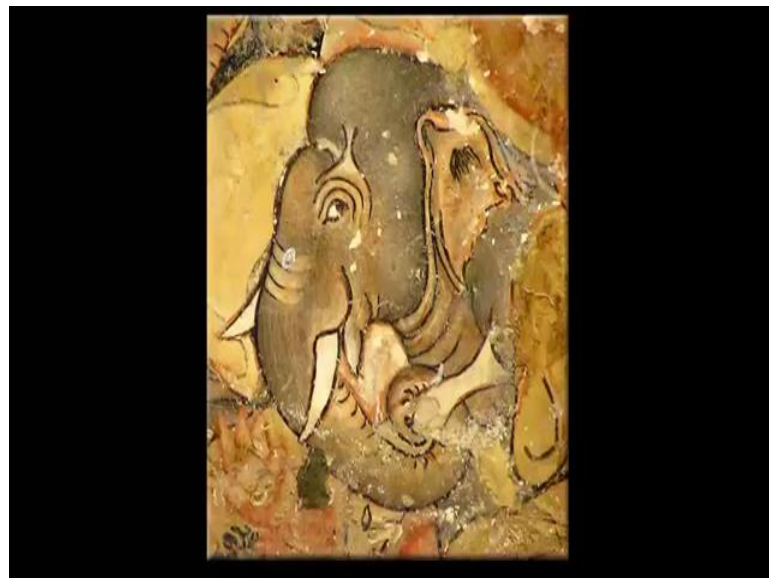
So, Ajanta paintings in spite of its stylistic (Refer time: 25:53) or a particular stylistic framework have also been able to explore the possibilities of bringing in naturalism into

their images with in their stylistic framework. All these images will prove what I am trying to convey.

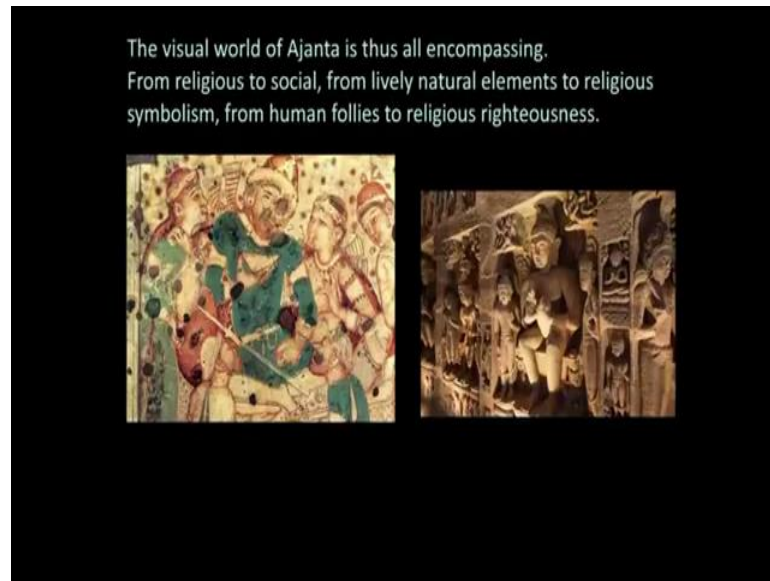
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Now, we can conclude that the visual world of Ajanta is thus all encompassing, from religious to social, from lovely natural elements to religious symbolism, from human follies to religious righteousness. Everything can be seen present within one given project called Ajanta.

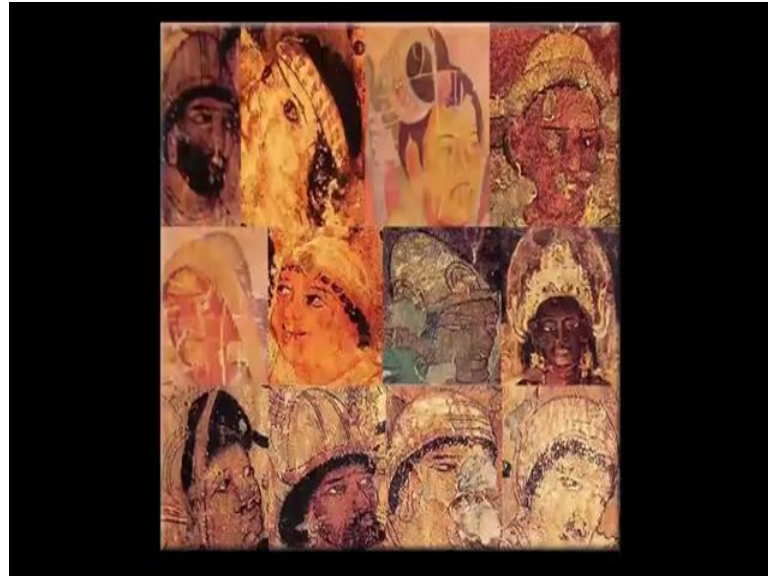
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That is why Ajanta stylistically speaking, Ajanta painting is not very typical or it is not tied up with one particular kind of representation. Simply because even if you focus on

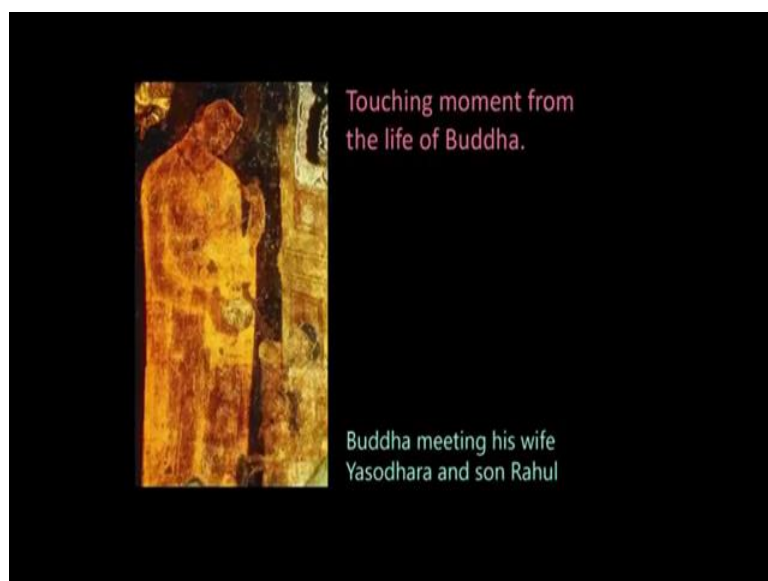
the various phases at Ajanta you will get to know what I am trying to convey and I have already discussed that.

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Various phases representing different clans, races, nations, countries and cultural backdrops, which mean that the painters were very observant, they were observing the real world at the same time they were also following a certain stylistic way of doing things.

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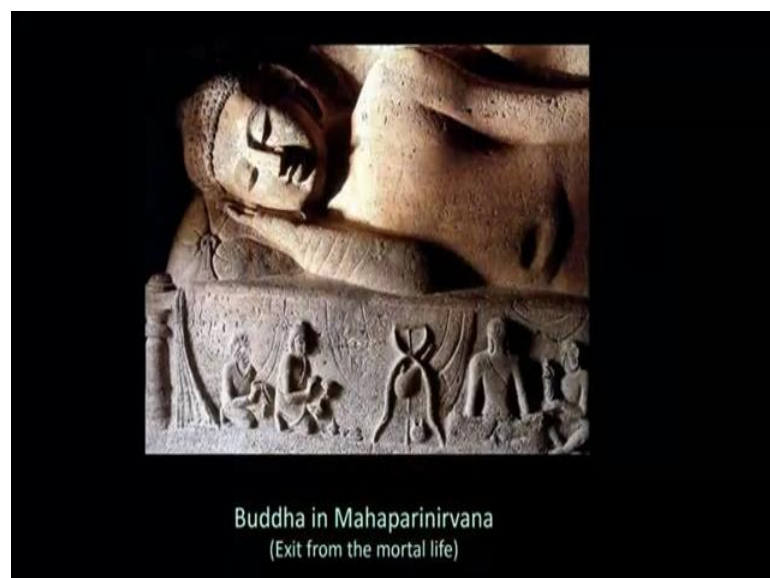


Now, before we wind up let us also talk about the humanitarian and the humanistic movements at Ajanta and for that I would like to take simply just two very interesting examples. One from the painting, one from the sculpture because Ajanta whether it is painting or sculpture is full of what we call touching moments from the life of Buddha or Jataka Tales. This particular painting depicts that moment, that very touching moment when Buddha he has been shown in a large scale to signify his spiritual power and significance. This is that moment when Buddha is meeting his wife Yashodhara and son Rahul after a long time.

After so many years after that particular moment when he had left his palace leaving his wife and son behind. So, it is after so many years he is meeting them at what particular moment, at what particular context that context, that moment when Yashodhara with their son Rahul also decides that no, she also going to leave the palace life, the royal life. She is going to join the Buddhist religion, she wants to become a monk and this particular moment was a very crucial moment for Buddha because, Buddha was also clueless at that particular point. He did not know how to respond, whether to allow Yashodhara to become monk or to ask her to go back to the palace.

No answer is given here, but that moment has been depicted with a very touching gesture and with a very touching composition and the last one will be from a sculpture.

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A very famous sculpture in Ajanta known as Buddha in Mahaparinirvana; as you might know that Mahaparinirvana is that particular phase in his life, let us call it the last phase when he is leaving the mortal life, but he is not shown as somebody who is dead.

He is shown as somebody who is in eternal place, who has been able to achieve that moment when he will be ultimately and finally, freed from all the mortal and earthly bondings of life. He will be free from the cycle of birth and rebirth. He will be finally emancipated and liberated once in for all. Mahaparinirvana signifies that moment.

Thank you.