

Introduction to Indian Art – An Appreciation
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Module – 03
Early Buddhist Art: Bharhut, Sanchi & Amaravati Stupa
Lecture: W2 - L3

Welcome viewers to the MOOCs online course on Introduction to Indian Art and Appreciation. Today is the third module of our second week on religious and cultural diversities and today we will be looking at some of the early representations visual representations of Buddhist art in India, specifically from three major sites famously known as barhut Sanchi and Amravati.

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Early Representation of Buddhist Art in India

Sunga Period (2nd century BC - 1st century BC)
Bharhut, Madhya Pradesh (2nd - 1st century BC)
Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh (1st century AD)

Satavahana Period (1st century BC - 3rd century AD)
Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh (3rd century AD)

Most of the art works (sculptures) from these three sites were originally part of the Buddhist architecture called Stupa.

Now whereas, all these sculptures that we will be looking at today were found, from either of these three sites, but unfortunately out of these three sites only one site that is Sanchi that is still where it was originally 2000 years back, Bharhut and Amaravati were discovered by the archaeologists in complete ruins.

So, they could not really reconstruct the Stupa, where these sculptures originally were placed. So, they had to bring all this sculptures to various museums and as a result today

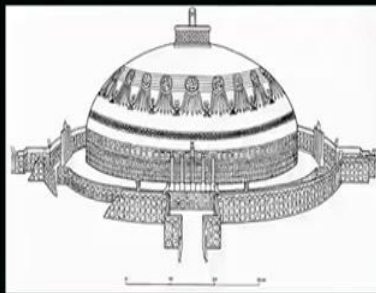
if you are to look at, the relief sculptures from Bharhut, you will have to go to Indian museum Kolkata and if you want to have a look at the splendid relief sculptures from Amaravathi you will have to go to either Chennai museum or British museum London. It is only Sanchi that the sculptures are still there where it was 2000 years back.

Another important fact is that where as Bharhut and Sanchi both the sites were located in Madhya Pradesh and they flourished as to Buddhist art sites during the period of Shunga dynasty. The Amaravathi the Stupa was built more or less in the same period or may be slightly later, but absolutely in a different location, that is in the present Andhra Pradesh in the district of Guntur and it was patronized by the Satavahana kings who ruled the Andhra region from around first century B.C to 3rd century A.D. So most of the art works we will be looking at today are from these three sites.

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In case of Bharhut and Sanchi, the stupa (circular dome) was kept blank and the sculptures found their places on the railing pillars, gateways (toranas) and brackets.

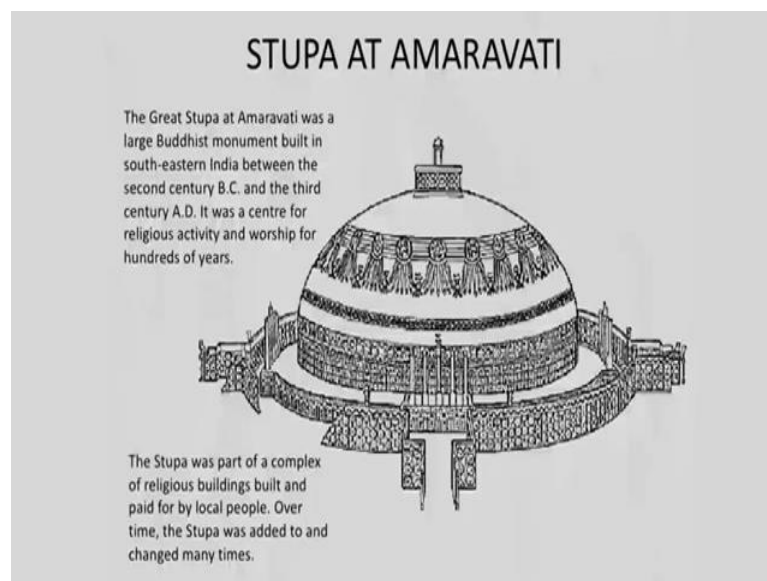
At Amaravati stupa, however, sculptures were placed also on the dome as well as railings, pillars and toranas.



But what is Stupa, as you might be already knowing that Stupa is a symbolic Buddhist architecture and it has a wonderful spherical dome, that is the most dominating element in any Stupa, surrounded by railings, gateways which are called Thoranas and a few more elements in order to guide the direction of circum ambulation that is pradakshina patha, that just around the Stupa.

Now in case of Bharhut and Sanchi, these sculptures were not or mostly found to be existing either on the railing pillars or on the Thoranas gateways, but in case of Amaravathi, the sculptures were adorning not only the railing pillars and Thoranas, but also the entire dome and this is what Amaravathi sculpture I mean the Stupa the entire Stupa comes up as a very distinct example and the very exceptional example in the history of Indian Buddhist art.

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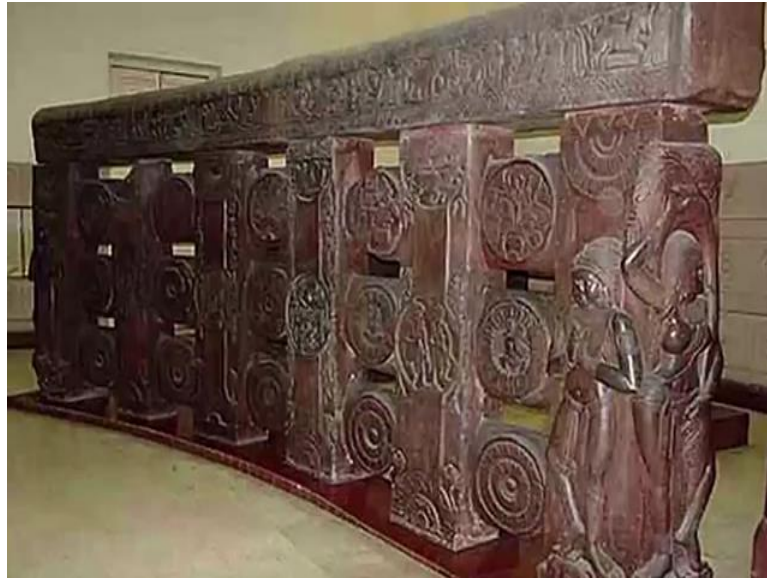
So, this is one drawing, a technical drawing of the Stupa at Amaravathi where you see that, not only the railings and the Thoranas the entire dome was beautifully decorated with wonderful relief sculptures. Now the sculptures and the Stupa in this particular relationship with each other physically do not exist anymore. But we do have a number of sculptures relief sculptures in terms of slabs in terms of long pillar like vertical, relief sculptures and also in the shape of circular Mendelian, but these sculptures are to be found separately in various museums, mainly in two museums that is Chennai government museum and British museum London.

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So, let us begin with Bharhut sculptures. Now as I told you Bharhut sculptures you will have to go to Indian museum Kolkata to see them, not exactly where it was 2000 years back, but what you see what you find in this sculptures, first of all because many of the sculptures were carved on the pillars. So, most of the figures they tend to be little vertical elongated and whenever they find a horizontal space, they try to spread the composition on both the sides thus making it less vertical and more horizontal. Secondly, what kind of subject matters you expect from Bharhut.

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Secondly, what kind of subject matters you expect from Bharhut. Obviously since it is a Buddhist monument, all the themes and subject matters all the figures, including the decorative motives that appeared in the Bharhut stupa, have something to do with Buddhist religious faith, Buddhist religious iconography.

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Within that you of course have, this kind of exceptionally different kinds of figures carved, not in great depth, but in the slightly shallow manner on red sand stone, yes the entire Bharhut structure all the relief sculptures in Bharhut were made in red sand stone. Sanchi will be slightly yellowish and Sanchi is made out of not red stone, but yellow sand stone. At Amaravathi they used completely different material; we shall come to that later.

So, you see this kind of what is popularly known as Yakshi figures in Bharhut, you also see various kinds of decorative motives.

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Now these decorative motives or the earlier Yakshi figure, they may not have anything very directly to do with Buddhist religious faith, but they are rooted in the Indian tradition, they also have certain kind of symbolic significance even in pre Buddhist era, but Buddhism or Buddhist monks and preacher, they were intelligent enough to adapt the Indian elements in terms of motives, in terms of symbolism, as a part of the Buddhist art. Hence, in all these three sites that is Bharhut, Sanchi and Amaravathi, we come across the strange creatures for example, something like a makara something like a crocodile, a kind of motive which is popularly known as makara and to be found in a numerable number very frequently in most of the Hindu temples, and they also appear here.

So, a Buddhist art site would not necessarily mean that everything that you see there, every sculpture or if it had paintings anything, that everything has to be directly connected with Buddhism. These are all peripheral images; these are all associated images and motives which also found a place in the larger fold of Buddhist art.

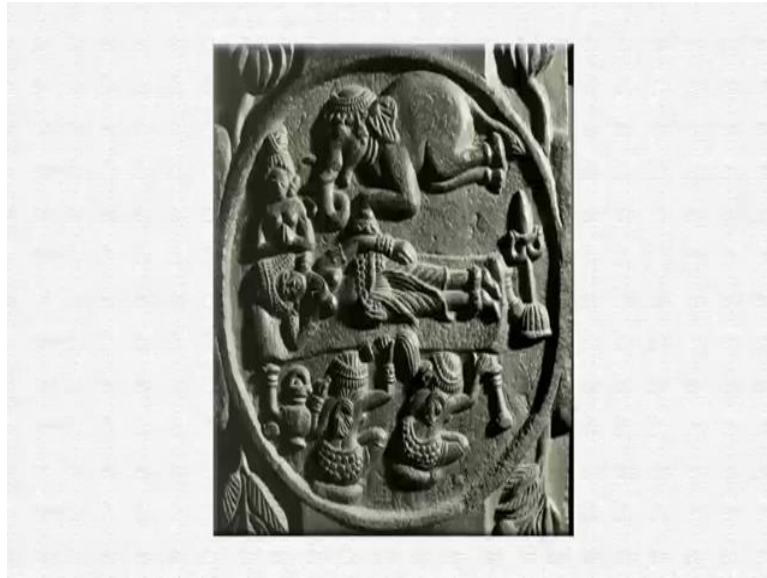
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For example you also have not only in Bharhut, but also in Sanchi and Amaravathi representations of very specific human beings, of course we cannot identify them we do not know who they are. These people could be patrons, they could be queens or kings after all these sites were patronized by the ruling dynasties.

So, it is quite natural that once in a while, they will be having some representations of the people who are actually patronizing this art.

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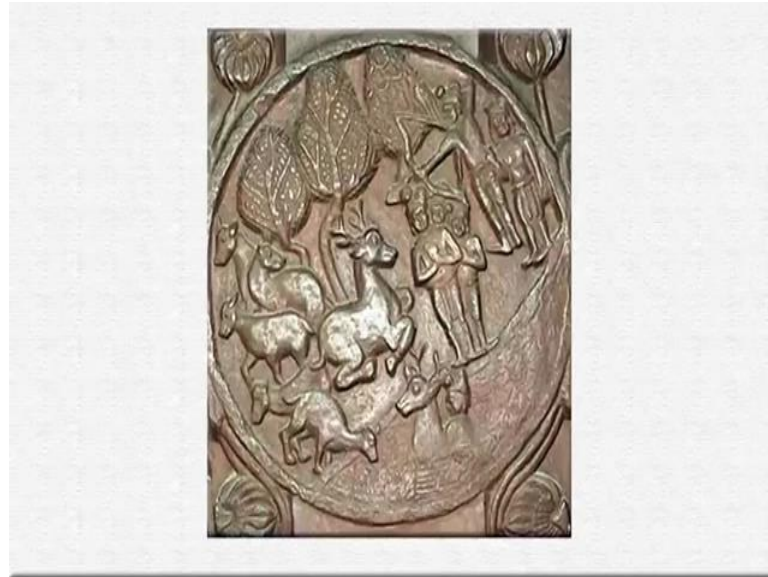


Along with that what begins in a big way, from Bharhut and that is going to emerge as a very long standing and very rich tradition in Indian art, not only in sculptures, but also in painting is the narrative tradition, that is telling stories through pictures. In Bharhut, in Sanchi, in Amaravathi in all these three sites you have a number of such relief panels which are not symbolic representation or not just mere iconographic representation of a religious symbol or deity, but these panels are story telling panels. For example this one, now this particular round shaped composition is known as Mayadevis dream that is a subject matter. Now who is mayadevi? Lord Buddha's mother and mayadevi had a dream before Buddha's birth, she dreamed a white elephant.

Of course, in a red sand stone relief sculpture, you cannot show a white elephant, but you do show an elephant you show mayadevi lying on her caught, you also show attendant figures and few objects kept just beneath the caught; how do you know that it is dream, how do you know that it is not a real elephant. First of all a little bit of knowledge about Buddhist stories, Buddhist legends life stories of Buddha will help you. Secondly, you also need to read the picture, you need to analyze and look at the composition very carefully because on the right hand side of the composition you see a lamp an oil lamp and that indicates that it is a night scene.

That indicates that it is a dream. That she is dreaming an elephant overing up on top of her and that indicates that, this is a subject matter about the birth of Buddha at Bharhut Sanchi and Amaravati; we have plenty of such compositions in relief sculptures, which are telling you he life stories of Buddha.

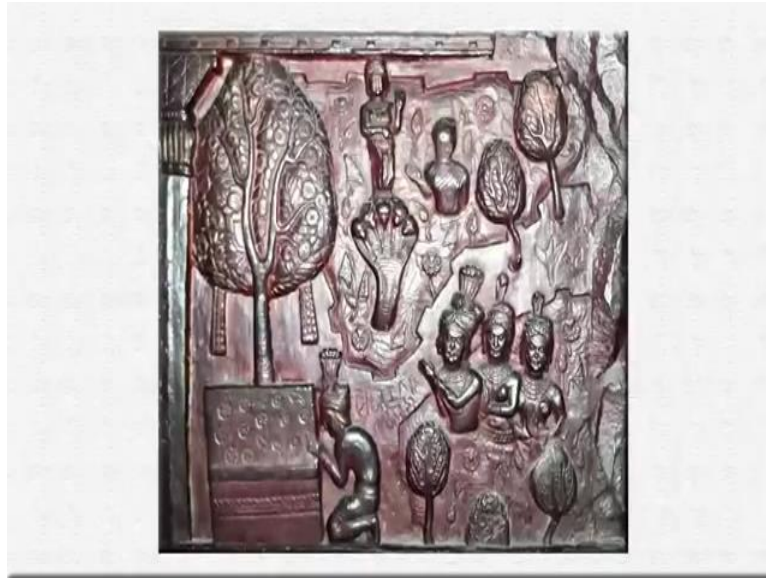
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At the same time you also have compositions, which are representations narrative representation of Jathaka stories. That is the previous lives of Buddha. So, here you have one two and also a third kind of narrative, these two narratives are somewhat exactly mythological, but half mythology, half legend, half real because nobody had seen Buddha. Buddha was born almost 500 years before, Bharhut relief sculptures were made.

So, in a sense it was imaginative and it was imagined that, this is how Buddha was born following a particular dream, dreamed by his mother mayadevi and then you have this Jathaka stories, which are also not real in that sense, but they believed in the previous births of Buddha, here is the Jathaka tells have been to constitute a very important part of Buddhist faith. I am talking about a third kind of narrative, which you see in both this three sites Bharhut Sanchi and Amaravathi.

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That is narrative; let us say descriptive representation of real life around. For example, if you look at this composition, here you do not see Buddha, but you see a Bodhi tree, which symbolically represents Buddha. And who were these people, contemporary people during that time, they belong to that period when Bharhut sculptures and the entire Bharhut Stupa was being built.

So, in a sense when you show all these people, paying their homage to Buddha and since at that point of time even not suppose to show Buddha in human form, so they used all kinds of symbols like Bodhi tree or Paduka it is a pair of shoes or chappals owned by Buddha or the thrown. So, all these symbolic representations of Buddha found in Bharhut relief sculptures and what you see at this figures were paying their homage to Buddha.

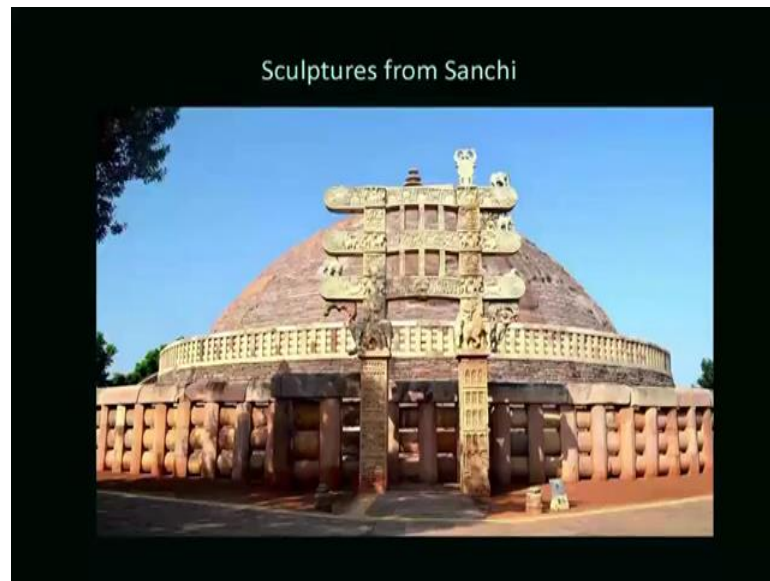
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And even in this particular composition, you not only get to see how the people of that time look like, but you also get to see the kind of houses they lived in, different kinds of objects they used. So, this third kind of narratives or narrative compositions is very important for us also because they are able to give you some visual information, about the society, about the culture, about the way of life of the people of that time, otherwise you do not have any other evidence.

So, through these images, through these sculptures, you get a second degree of information about the society. Of course, these are represented images, represented information; still you can actually get something out of it and can imagine a picture which comes very close to the society of that time.

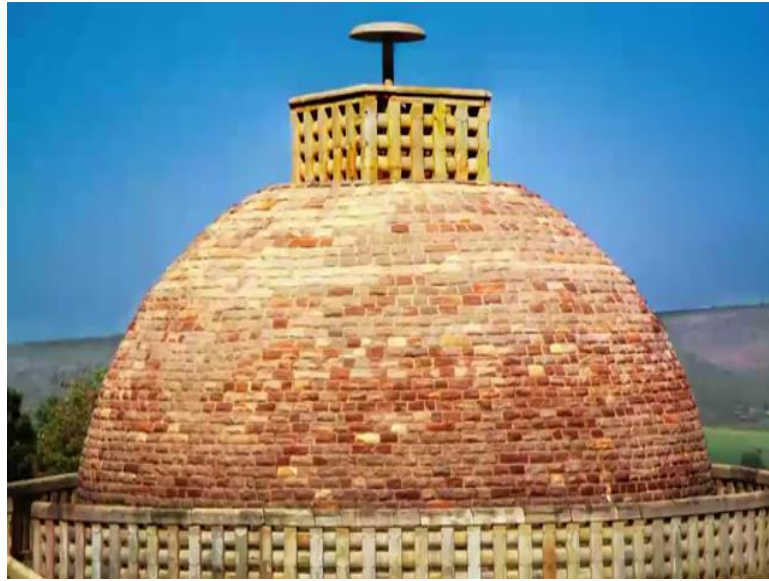
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Similarly, at Sanchi also you find a whole range of relief sculptures, depicting either the life of Buddha or Jathaka tells or the daily life or descriptions of contemporary events happening at that point of time. So, you have these three kinds of narrative, apart from of course, the decorative bands, and the ornamental bars, and so on so forth. Similar to Bharhut at Sanchi also you find most of these sculptures, either on the railings or on the gate ways which are known as Thoranas.

And you have four Thoranas erected on four sides, following the cardinal sides that are east west north south, but there is not a single relief sculpture on the body of the dome or the Stupa like Bharhut. You will find sculptures right on the body of the Stupa at Amaravathi, but not here or even in Bharhut.

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At Sanchi you might come across the small strange looking Stupa without Thorana, but railing and of course, the Stupa is mounted by a small little balcony and a (Refer Time: 17:40) which looks like an umbrella, but there is hardly a relief sculpture on that Stupa.

Now at Sanchi, actually there are more than one Stupas, the one that is very famous is known as the great Stupa of Sanchi built in 1st century A.D. Rest of the other blank stupas, without any sculpture or very minimum relief sculpture were built, right to that may be contemporary to Bharhut. They are of course significant and very important for us art historians, art archaeologists, but in order to appreciate the beautiful sculpture, we need to look at the Great Stupa of Sanchi built in 1st century A.D that is this.

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Now, look at any Thorana for that matter. There are four Thoranas in the great Stupa of Sanchi, look at any one. Even to look carefully at one particular Thorana, you will take one hour there is so much to see. Each and every corner each and every inch of that Thorana has been filled up with relief sculptures depicting various kinds of things and almost without repetition; this is very interesting so much of variations, in terms of themes subject matters.

There are images which represent the presence of a royal patron, there are of course, plenty of images which represent the Buddhist faith, the Buddhist religion and there are plenty of decorative and ornamental bands, which are a creation of a great talent and mind, no doubt about that.

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Look at one part just one detail from a Sanchi Thorana gate way, in this small little detail you can see so many things happening, you can see somebody on the lion back, you can see a beautifully carved almost a free standing elephant right on top of one of the corners of Thorana on the horizontal bar, you can see at the left hand portion of that bar just beside the spiral kind of motive that a group of people paying their homage to a Bodhi tree. So, every inch, every portion of this Thorana this horizontal bars these vertical pillars we have something to appreciate for us.

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The other side of the Thorana where you see the famous bracket yaksh, this ensures female figures which are found to be hanging at the brackets of the various corners of Thorana, are very well known because of its sculptural quality, because of its centeredness and also because of the way the sculpture handle the stone after all bharhut, where as bharhut was made in red sand stone, which is slightly harder. Sanchi was made in yellow sand stone, which is softer.

So, in a way a softer yellow stone, when you look at another detail, from another Thorana from Sanchi; you see this very famous image of bracket Yakshi, she is known as bracket Yakshi because this kind of female figures are found at sanchji at the brackets of the various Thoranas.

Now these yakshis are very famous not only for what they are, but also for their sensuous quality and the way the stone has been handled by the sculpture because it is slightly soft, ware as the Bharhut stone was red sand stone and harder than the yellow sand stone used in Sanchi. Hence where as on the one hand yellow sand stone can very easily lend itself, to various kinds of carvings and different kind of modulations on the sculptures, but at the same time the sculpture runs the risk of over carving it and thereby damaging the entire process.

So, he has to be very, very careful where to stop, and how to create then sensuousness which is a very important aspect of this bracket yakshis.

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Look at another example another specimen from Sanchi, very densely composed. Yet each and every detail has been worked out, with at most delicacy and we must remember all these works are being done.

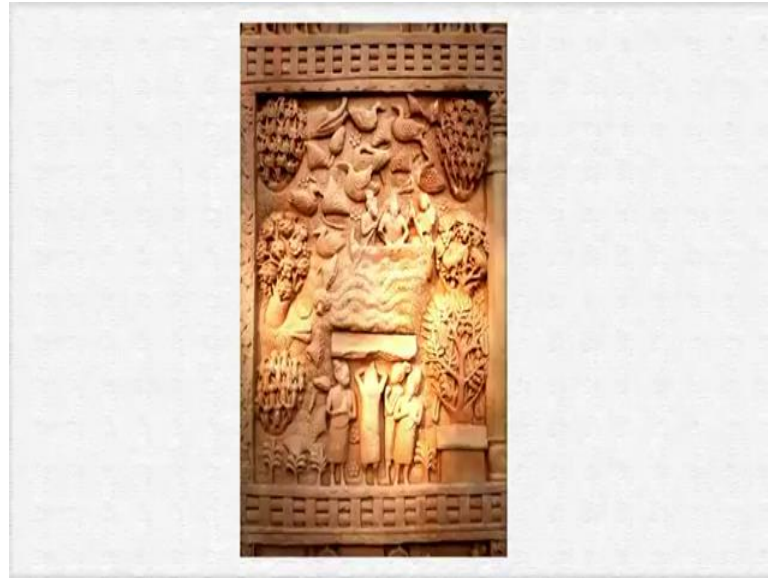
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Not on paper not on wall, but in stone. So, you are using the stone in a way, as if you are doing a drawing, or a painting on a piece of paper, which is fairly difficult. And Sanchi sculptures have done that with a remarkable skill. Now we were telling you about the symbolic representation of Buddha, this is also another way of representing Buddha without showing him in human form.

So, you show he is the impression of his feet, with chakra. That circular motives right at the center of the impressions of his feet and that is Buddha that is enough to symbolize Buddha and that is enough for the devotees, to pay their homage to the symbol.

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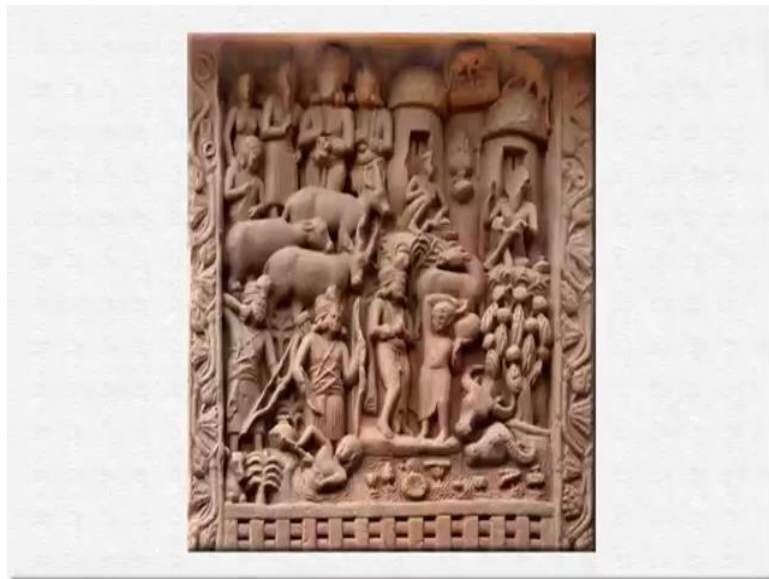
And we do get plenty of such symbols in Sanchi, in Bharhut and in Amaravathi. Now wherever there is a scope for narrative composition, beaten from the life of Buddha or Jathaka tells. I have already told you that the sculptures do get the scope of accommodating different images from daily life or surrounding life. And that is how you get to know about the life of the society, at that point of time including nature the birds the animals everything.

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Look at any such detail from Sanchi, Bharhut, Amaravati, if you look at the sculptures carefully, if you look at each and every figure carefully and what is there on the background you can almost feel, you can almost see a vibrant society in the background.

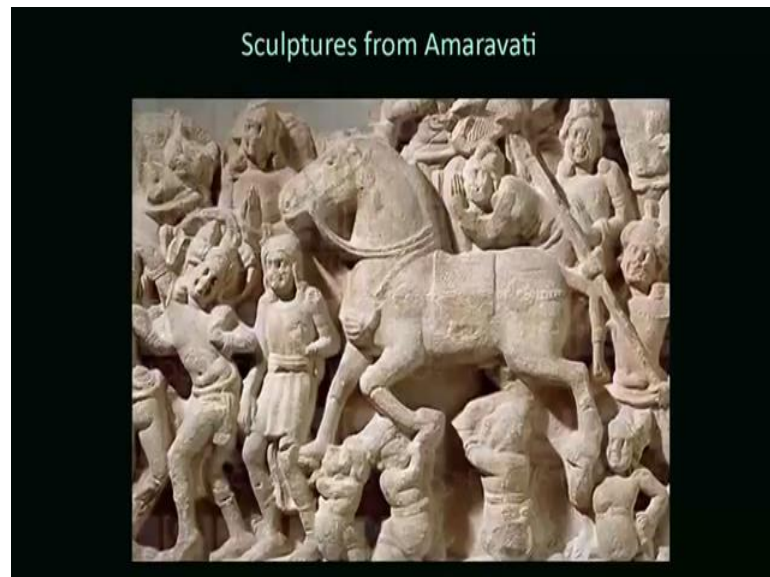
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Like in this composition you can see residential houses, rural houses, you can see

hanumans, various kinds of domestic and wild animals everything that the life is constituted of. At that point of time gets a representation in a site, which is primarily dedicated to Buddhism.

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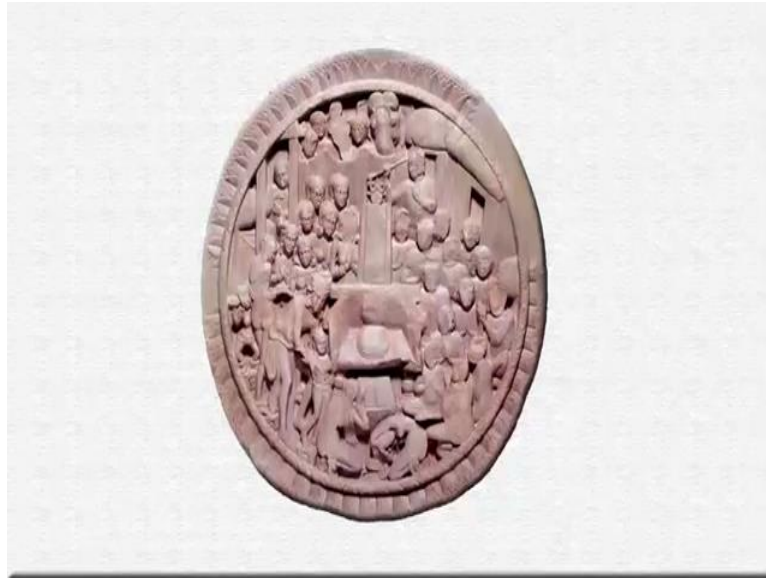
Which also means that, religion in ancient India, was not so religious, I means it is not only about religion because as far as religious art is concerned, whether it is Bharhut Sanchi, Amaravathi, Ajanta, Mahabalipuram anywhere you go you will see that religious life is very well combined with the social life. So, in religious art you can happily expect to see some representations of social life as well.

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Now, our third site Amaravathi, where you once again see similar kind of narrative compositions, symbolic compositions, and ornamental composition so and so forth. That the contribution of Amaravathi to Indian sculpture, to put it simply is this that decides representing Buddhist stories and Buddhist ideas in a beautiful way, they introduced something that was absent so far, in Bharhut and Sanchi and that is the pictorial depth in their compositions. So, when you look at this particular composition, what you see is not just the figures and the elephants placed on one flat plane, you can almost feel some kind of depth behind each figure.

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So, you can almost feel a space that is going through into the pictorial frame. In other words Amaravathi sculptures were able to introduce, the idea of visual perspective, and very successfully. They were able to not only introduce, they were able to kind of execute it implement this idea.

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So, convincingly those 4 inches, 5 inches, 6 inches slabs stone slab, may look like 5 feet, 6 feet deep slab because of the visual illusion this perspective creates to our eyes.

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And I must tell you at this point that the stone used at Amaravathi, is neither red sand stone nor yellow sand stone, but a kind of green marble known as Balnadi marble, locally available Balnadi marble was used.

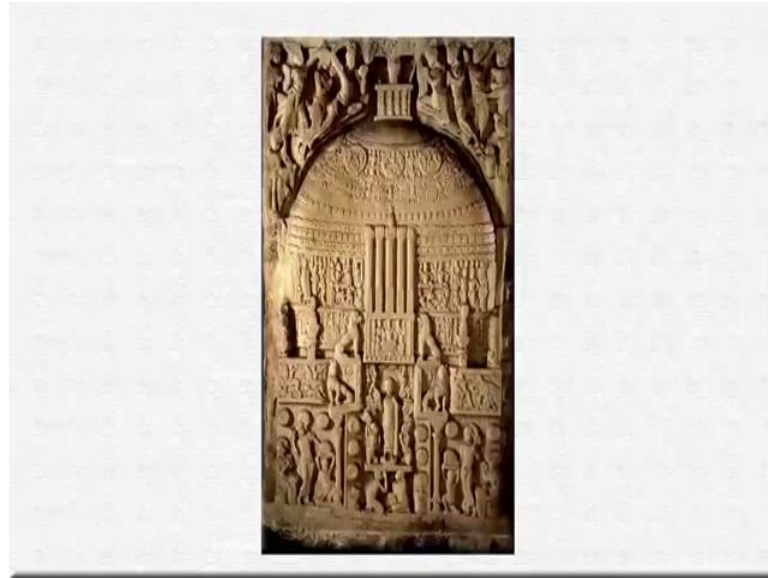
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And marble being a very soft stone again it was extremely advantageous for the Amaravathi sculptures to go into integrate carvings and that is how we are able to get something like this.

So, in these last two slides, we will be able to see another exceptional kind of image which is rare in Buddhist art that is representation of Stupa itself. So, if you are wondering that how exactly Amaravathi Stupa look like or how it might have looked like if you are trying to imagine.

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So, this photograph and the next one can help you to imagine how Amravathi Stupa originally look like and these are not fake or fabricated ideas, these very images of Stupa were made by Amaravathi sculptures, who built the Stupa itself. So, in other words though it was left to our imagination initially, but now Amaravathi sculptures themselves offer us the clue to create a flexible picture of the real look and the real style of Amaravathi Stupa.

Thank you.