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# India

PERSPECTIVAS



# Mauryan Art & Architecture

THE GLORY THAT WAS

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Popular art is the expression of people's sensitivity which rests reveals the psychology of the society from which it emerges. Mauryan art is one such form which reflects the glory and sophistication of the third century B.C.

Indian art at its earliest finds anchorage in the pages of Mauryan history, finding expression in town-planning, cave architecture, monolithic pillars, stupas and chaitya halls. One wonders at the sudden outburst of architectural activities during this period (323 BC - 185 BC). The only remains of similar activity date back to the Harappan age (2000 BC). The entire long period in between is a blank as far as architecture is concerned, although there are references to sculptures and architecture executed in clay and wood that must have perished down the ages.

Religion, on the eastern horizon of India, was on an altogether different footing. Worship of *Chaityas* was in vogue and it was one of the seven conditions of welfare of the state, laid down by Buddha. Buddhist texts refer to *Chaityas* of various forms. Some were merely a tree with a railing around and a gateway which was a habitation of a *Yaksha*. On the ancient Indian coins (punch marked coins), a most familiar symbol is a tree with a railing enclosure. These railings and gateways certainly provided ample scope for craftsmen to display their artistic skill. Equally popular was the erection of commemorative

*Stupas* over the deposits of bodily remains and they are considered among the oldest religious structures in India. Gradually, *Stupas* came to be identified with those of Buddha and his disciples. These *Stupas* and *Chaityas* certainly required the artists' layout and designing.

Greek accounts, the Arthashastra and Buddhist and Jain literature of the times throw good light on the Mauryan period. Several big cities, such as Takshasila, Maskavati, Sakala and Patliputra are mentioned in these sources. A strong sense of imagination is required to recreate the long lost Mauryan Patliputra that was once replete with multistoreyed wooden buildings and palaces surrounded by parks and ponds. According to the Greek chroniclers, Patliputra was a garden city. The royal parks were lined with evergreen trees, which neither grew old nor shed their leaves. This capital city had more than 570 towers and 64 gates and was surrounded by a wooden palisade with loopholes for arches. A ditch around the city served the dual purpose of defence as well as of sewage disposal. The city wall had gateways with draw bridges. Every street had its water courses serving as house drains that finally emptied into the moat. Any deposit that obstructed the passage was punishable by law. House owners were required to have fire prevention elements. The streets were provided with vessels of water and sand kept ready in thousands. Strong fortification and perfect town planning of Patliputra served as a model for later builders. Patanjali's *Mahabhasya* refers to Pusyamitra Sunga building a city

Facing page: The "Didarganj Yakshini" - a masterpiece of Mauryan art.





around Ayodhya (Sukosala) based on the pattern of Patliputra.

Much of the wooden Pataliputra was dressed in stone during the reign of Ashoka. This change was so sudden that it prompted Fa Hien, the Chinese traveller who visited India between 400 -415 AD, to believe that *genni* (demons) were commissioned to put up the massive stone structures!

The archeological site at Kumrahar in Patna is believed to be the Mauryan palace. The remains found include a hall with 80 pillars, each polished to perfection. Patanjali refers to it as Chandragupta Sabha, while the Greek sources call it as Hall of Audience. Except for one column, others are in a fragmentary state. Arranged in eight rows, with ten pillars in each, the plan resembles the hall of hundred columns as Persepolis. Kautilya, the legendary minister of Chandragupta, probably urged the king to attend to public issues here for three hours each day. Within the Kumrahar complex are the excavated remains of Ashoka's charitable hospital. A little distance away is another Ashokan remain, the *Agam Kuan*, or the fathomless well, believed to be a part of the legendary hell created by the emperor before his change of heart and conversion to Buddhism.

Remains of Mauryan art and artefacts can be seen at several museums. The Patna Museum houses some terracottas and figures like the lion head, the torso of a Jain tirthankara and the Didarganj yakshi, the latter having been evaluated as one of the finest

The Vaishali Stupa built by Emperor Ashoka.



specimens of the Mauryan period. This five feet high statue displays the traditional features of an Indian beauty, and has heavy ornamentation and drapery. All these figures bear the characteristic Mauryan high polish. The museum also houses the lion capital of the Rampurva pillar (put up by Ashoka), bearing the first six pillar edicts.

The Indian Museum in Calcutta also has a good collection of stone railings, pillars, cross bars from the Bharhut stupa, various sculptures like the two griffins from Patliputra, a naga head from Rajgir and a few other statues.

Some of the Mauryan sculptures can best be admired in the form of the mighty monoliths or the Sula Stambhas put up throughout the Mauryan empire. Scholars are divided on the question of their origin, utility and development. A section believes that such pillars were worshipped in India before the times of Ashoka. The *Mahabharata* describes a similar wooden or golden *yupa* established by Brahma and worshipped by Yudhishtira. The other extreme view is that these were the creation of Greek masons, invited to fashion these monumental pillars. While it is true that friendly relations between the Mauryan and Greek courts continued for generations, we can at best surmise that these pillars display a skilful synthesis of Indian, Achaemenian, Assyrian and Hellenistic arts.

Some of these pillars have remained *in situ*, like most pillars

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The "Loma Rishi Cave" in Barabar Hills – another facet of Mauryan architecture.

in Bihar. A few of them were tempting enough for inquisitive monarchs like Firoz Shah Tughlaq (1351-88 AD) to carry them off to decorate their capitals. Yet others have been ravaged by time and weather. These Mauryan monoliths vary in style and artistic finesse that characterize the patience, skill and craftsmanship of the great builders. The most striking element is the sheen imparted to these tall, tapering shafts. "The stone is altogether as bright as jade," attested the Chinese pilgrim Hieun Tsang in 7th century AD. The pillars are crowned with a so-called 'inverted lotus' or 'Persopolitan Bell' on which rests the circular or rectangular abacus, serving as a base for single animal figures such as of a lion, a bull or an elephant. Most of the pillars are inscribed with Ashokan edicts on account of his spiritual vigour and his solidarity with the Buddhist order.

The Lion capital of the Sarnath pillar (now displayed at the Sarnath Museum) has been adopted as the national emblem of India. The round abacus is carved with four animals - elephant, bull, horse and a lion, each separated by a wheel or *Dharmachakra*. Atop the abacus are four lions standing back-to-back. These were originally topped by another wheel, of which now only a few broken spokes survive.

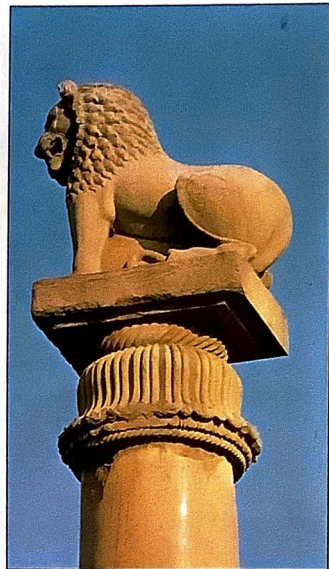
The symbolism of the Lion capital has been variously explained. The *Dharmachakra* is universally accepted as the symbol of Buddha's *dharm*a or the law of piety, while the lion stands for regal majesty and divine power. The four animals on the abacus depict the guardians of four quarters. The elephant

guards the east, the horse is stationed in the south, the bull takes care of the west and the lion looks after north. Some interpret these animals as symbols of various events of Buddha's life. The inverted lotus or the Persopolitan Bell is translated as a symbol of enlightenment and creativity.

Steeped in age old burial customs, the stupas or the sepulchral mounds were originally erected amidst earthen platforms created over four cardinal points. The next phase witnessed the introduction of wood and the development of a solid dome, capped by a square box under the shadows of an umbrella. Later, circumambulatory passages were created around the stupa which was fenced by a massive railing with entrance gateways. The Mauryan era saw the replacement of the wooden structures by stone, and in the Sunga period, the stupas themselves were enlarged and decorated.

A series of caves on Barabar and Nagarjuni hills (24 kms from Gaya in the Indian state of Bihar) are also from the Mauryan period. They are not only India's earliest rock-cut caves but also highlight the skills of the ancient craftsmen who excavated them, polished their interior hard granite walls and graced them with doorways with sloping jambs.

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The Ashokan Pillar.