

# 7. The Artistic and Architectural Marvels of Ajanta and Ellora Caves: A Scholarly Review

Nagul Yogendra S J, PG Scholar

## Abstract

This review paper discusses the origin, characteristics and rock carvings of the Ajanta caves and Ellora caves at Maharashtra in India. The caves are the monumental relics of the cultural and artistic greatness of India that is one of the most important legacies of the rock cut construction in the world. The paper shows how the Ajanta and Ellora developed over time, how they contributed to the Buddhist and Hindu and Jain traditions in respect of art. Moreover, it also talks about the changes in style between Ajanta and Bagh caves, conservation works done by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), and the cultural influence of these ancient works on a bigger scale. According to Spink (2005), Ajanta, as it is, is a totality of Buddhist art. The paper ends with the conclusion that as long as heritage management preservation continues to be a challenge, sustainable heritage management is required..

**Keywords:** Ajanta and Ellora caves, Mural paintings, Bodhisattva Padmapani, King Janaka and Wife, Persian Ambassador Painting, Buddha Paintings, Doorway Paintings

## Introduction

Both UNESCO World Heritage Sites, the Ajanta and Ellora caves are the best examples of rock-cut architecture and mural art in India. The Ajanta Caves, the ancient caves of the 2 nd century BCE to 6 th century CE, are the caves that are well known with the magnificent Buddhist paintings and Buddhist sculptures that depict the stories of Jataka and the important events of the life of Buddha. In the same breath, the Ellora Caves, which were designed between the 5 th and 11 th centuries CE, have an amazing coexistence of three major religions, namely: Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism, within the same monumental complex. The 7 th century Chinese traveller, Xuanzang, wrote about such Indian monuments saying they are a show of piety cut into the inner fabric of the mountains. The places are the examples of the long-standing customs of the India to express their artistic vision and be tolerant in religion and synthesize their cultures (Archaeological Survey of India, n.d.; UNESCO, 1983).

## Methodology

This discussion justifies this review by the wide review of the published historical researches, archaeological surveys and documents in epigraphs. The review of secondary sources such as the historic theses, scholarly journals, and the reports of the ASI consolidated the knowledge of the chronology of the caves, artistic methods to be used and conservation work was done. There has also been the consideration of observation of the site studies and photographs (Spink, 1998; Gokhale, 1973).

Description

### Ajanta Caves

The Ajanta Caves are situated close to Aurangabad in Maharashtra on the banks of the Waghora River and the caves are 29 rock-cut structures 25 of which are Viharas (monastic dwellings) with only four being Chaityas (prayer halls). These caves were built between the year 200 BCE and 650 CE. The Ajanta Caves built over the rule of the Satavahana and, then, later during the reign of the Vakataka, with the special patronage of King Harishena, are renowned to their fresco paintings and sculptures

depicting Buddhist legends. The murals describe the life and Jataka stories of the Buddha with such masterpieces being Bodhisattva Padmapani, King Janaka and his Wife and the images of Persian ambassadors (Weiner, 1970).



Figure 1. Exterior view of the Ajanta Caves nestled in the Sahyadri Hills (left) and interior view of a Chaitya Hall showcasing the intricately carved stupa and rock-cut architecture (right).

### Ellora Caves

The Ellora Caves are situated approximately 100 kilometers away Ajanta, and they consist of 34 important buildings; 17 Hindu, 12 Buddhists and five Jain caves. Ellora was erected in the 5<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> centuries CE; it incorporates the traditions of pluralism and artisanship of India. One of the most famous monuments that it has is the Kailash Temple ( Cave 16 ), which is a piece of architectural wonder carved out of a solitary rock under the Rashtrakuta king Krishna I (Mirashi, 1945). The stylistic diversity and the mastery of the technique also can be viewed in the Vishwakarma Cave (Buddhist), Rameshwar Temple (Hindu) and Indra Sabha (Jain) (Spink, 2009).

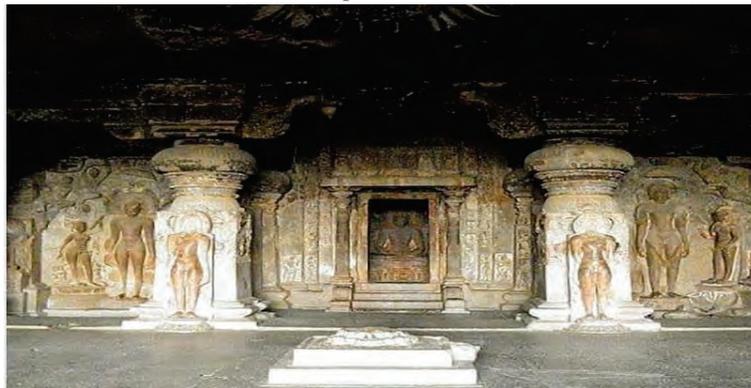


Figure 2. Interior view of a Jain cave at Ellora, depicting intricately carved Tirthankara sculptures and detailed architectural pillars that exemplify the refined craftsmanship of the period.

### Mural Paintings

Ajanta murals form the culmination of the civilization of Indian painting. They are painted in fresco, which is the reason why they have flowing lines, emotionality and complexity in composition. By contrast, the murals in Ellora, where they are fewer and more diminished, are Hindu in subject, and show fundamentally Indian the iconographical changes towards the forms of medieval Indian

iconography. These paintings according to Buddha Prakash (1962) go across the ages and give life to stone and color to nothingness. The paintings Bodhisattva Padmapani, the king Janaka and his wife, and the Persian Ambassador are some of the important ones painted on the ceilings of Cave 1. The subsequent Ellora paintings display new features of the regional styles such as sharp features and introduction of bold outlines (Spink, 1998)..

#### Differences between Ajanta and Ellora

S.No	Ajanta Caves	Ellora Caves
1	Primarily Buddhist cave monuments showcasing the beauty of Buddhist religious art.	Comprise Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain caves representing religious harmony.
2	Constructed between the 2nd century BCE and 6th century CE.	Built between the 5th and 11th centuries CE.
3	Located on the banks of the Waghora River in Maharashtra.	Located near Verul, about 100 km from Ajanta in the Sahyadri Hills.
4	Consists of 30 caves, including monasteries (Viharas) and prayer halls (Chaityas).	Comprises 34 major caves — 17 Hindu, 12 Buddhist, and 5 Jain.
5	Renowned for intricate mural paintings and sculptures depicting the life of Buddha and Jataka tales.	Celebrated for rock-cut temples and monolithic architecture, notably the Kailash Temple.

#### Protection and Management

The conservation and protection of Ajanta and Ellora is handled by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act (1958). They are conservation strategies which comprise structural monitoring, climate management, and access of the vulnerable areas to tourists as well as using scientific restoration methods. The Comprehensive Conservation Management Plan (CCMP) is more focused on sustainable development by involving the community, and training the staff and documenting the data digitally (ASI, n.d.; UNESCO, 1983).

#### Conclusion

Ajanta and Ellora Caves remain to be the best examples of the era of Indian art and spirituality that cannot be compared to anything. In addition to their architectural and aesthetical splendor, they indicate philosophical richness and cultural inclusiveness which characterizes Indian civilization. To maintain such sites conservancy must involve interdisciplinary efforts in full time and apply novel technology and awareness to the people so that the heritage can be preserved to be enjoyed by the generations yet to come.

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