

CHANGING CANVAS

Art with a purpose

The earlier column focussed on prehistoric art, and this piece moves to what emerged during the next significant period of evolution in art - ancient art

Anusha Parthasarathy



PHOTO: OBERHOLSTER VENITA / PIXABAY

Ancient art (around 5,000 BC to 500 AD)

As centuries went by and humans were no longer new to the world, they began to evolve. They created societies, cities, kingdoms and their own language too. Now that they didn't have to scribble on walls to speak to their neighbours, of what use were their artistic talents? Humans decided that art would be an essential part of their society's ecosystem.

Ancient art refers to that period when classical kingdoms of the world had established themselves in areas such as Greece, Egypt, India, China, Mesopotamia, Persia and so on. The rulers and religious heads needed ways to record their stories and exhibit religious integrity. So they depicted gods and religious symbols through art.

So, much of the art created during this time was because of these civilisations. And each of them was different, representing the culture that created it. Art was a form of recording oral history, decorating ornaments and weapons and also flaunting power.

Ancient art is considered the foundation of future art movements. For example, ancient Egyptians often used symbolic images and text (hieroglyphs) to tell the stories of rulers and gods. Similarly, the Mesopotamians had the 'Code of Hammurabi', a set of rules carved in stone (in pic). The most iconic features of this work are the blazing images of Hammurabi and Shabash (a Mesopotamian god) that adorn it.

There are similar examples of ancient art in different civilisations. China and India had Bronze Age, and many bronze sculptures and tools have been discovered dating back to that time. These bronzeware were used for religious and domestic purposes. The Ajanta and Ellora caves of India are also examples of religious imagery and cave art. These date back to 2 BC. Ancient Greek art included pottery, sculptures and panel paintings. But most of the Greek paintings disappeared by 4 BC. and the Pitsa Panels, dating back to 500 BC, are the oldest surviving Greek panel paintings in existence.



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Examples of ancient art

- **Egyptian Book of the Dead:** This scroll, known as the "Book of Coming Forth by Day" was found entombed with various people in ancient Egypt. It is a guide to the afterlife and contains magic spells, instructions and other pictures of how the afterlife would be. It bears a striking resemblance to the life of that time.

- **The Pergamon Altar:** Ancient Greek art was too straightforward, with sculptures and panels of heroes and gods. Then, the Hellenistic period changed things around and made the depictions more dramatic. The sculptures were no longer passive but told a sensational story. The Pergamon Altar, now in Berlin, dates back to 160 BC and its images are full of action.

- **Ajanta Caves:** The Ajanta caves in Aurangabad, Maharashtra, are some of the finest existing examples of ancient Indian art, dating between 2 BC and 480 AD. The caves have paintings (in pic) and rock-cut sculptures - some of the earliest forms of Buddhist religious art. They depict the different births and rebirths of the Buddha, other Buddhist deities and also the Jataka tales.



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Wow facts

- The Egyptian civilisation was well known for its incredible architectural feats. But did you know that it was among the first civilisations to have its own unique form of art? Most Egyptian art forms had set patterns - ordinary people were painted in profile (from one side) with their faces, eyes and nose facing forward. Women were painted with fairer skin and men were dark brown. There were similar dictates for pharaohs (rulers) and gods.

- Among China's most reputed ancient art are the Terracotta Warriors (or Terracotta Army), dating back to 210 BC (in pic). These are an assembly of 8,099 life-sized clay statues found in the tomb of the first Qin Emperor, Qin Shi Huang. These soldiers (infantry, cavalry, military officers, soldiers on horses etc.) were meant to serve the king in the afterlife.

Fun experiment

The Egyptian civilisation developed a unique style of art where everything had a set pattern. Why not create your own language with pictures and symbols? How would you tell your life story through these?



PHOTO: D. KRISHNAN

Answer this!

These caves in India were discovered by British officer Captain John Smith in 1819. He stumbled upon them on a tiger-hunting trip. Which caves are these and where are they located?

Answer: Ajanta Caves in Aurangabad.