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# THE INFLUENCE OF AJANTA ON INDIAN MODERN ART

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## THE INFLUENCE OF AJANTA ON INDIAN MODERN ART

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## **Abstract**

The artwork of the Ajanta cave temples has had a major impact on the definition of Indian artistic identity and upon the modern art movement in India. This paper describes the history and construction of the caves and their specific stylistic and ideological influence of and interpretation by various key figures of the modern art movement. The first major projects to produce copies of the Ajanta frescoes (those by Major Robert Gill, John Griffiths and his students, and Lady Herringham and Abanindranath Tagore's students) are surveyed and put in context. Various early art-historians and critics are examined with respect to their theories and thoughts about to Ajanta. They include early thinkers of the Bengal school such as E. B. Havell, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, and Abanindranath, and further critics of the school, such as Amrita Sher-Gil.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Shukla Sawant for advising me on this project, pointing me in interesting directions and giving me good books and art-movements to examine, Professor Mary Storm for helping me discover and flesh out this topic and what specifically I would study, and of course SIT: World Learning and Tufts University for giving me this wonderful opportunity. I'd also like to thank the American Institute for Indian Studies for graciously letting me use their library with a wide variety of relevant and interesting books. The collections and exhibitions of the National Gallery of Modern Art, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, and the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum were all beautiful, stimulating, and helpful for this project. And lastly, I'd like to acknowledge the Archaeological Survey of India and their work to preserve and present the caves at Ajanta and Ellora.

## Introduction

To get to the Ajanta caves is no easy task. The nearest airport or train station is located in the city of Aurangabad, a two and a half hour bus ride away. Upon arrival in the village of Fardapur, it is necessary to take a rickshaw to the entrance of the park, pay an entrance fee, walk to another bus station, buy a bus ticket, and be driven an additional few kilometers by the Waghora River with hills rising steeply on either side. Then, it is only after climbing up stairs for the last few hundred feet that you get your first view of the caves. Indeed, the caves have always been distant and difficult to reach; the Mahayana construction seems to have been sponsored from the distant Vidarbha, capital of the Vakataka empire, and the painters and sculptors responsible had to travel from far-off regions to complete the caves.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to imagine what the caves must have looked like in any of the many centuries that they have existed. During the first century BCE, just a few caves were completed or were being worked on. Later on, around the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, the Mahayana caves were completed for a total of 28 different excavations, lining the entire U-shaped bend in the river, carved into steep cliff faces with steps descending to the river side. Only a few of them were actually occupied, and those only for a short while. Back then, though, the brightly painted entrances must have stood out against the basalt and greenery in which they were situated. In the fall of the Vakataka empire, the caves fell into disuse as the area around them became dangerous. Gradually, the paint wore away and the dirt piled up; after the eighth century, they were mostly forgotten and overgrown.<sup>2</sup>

With the British rediscovery and excavation, the caves became open again and came to resemble what they are today; a steady process of dilapidation began. The caves, covered and protected against people and the elements, had been quite well preserved. Now open again, exposed to light again, the paintings started fading and the statues, crumbling. Attempts to preserve the artwork often went awry; layers of low-quality varnish were applied by painters in the late 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Spink, "Ajanta in a Historical and Political Context," *Maharashtra Pathik* 2, no. 1 (1990): 7

<sup>2</sup>Mira Seth, *Indian Painting: The Great Mural Tradition* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2006), 27

century, yellowing the paintings.<sup>3</sup> Bits of the paintings and sculptures were chipped off and kept as souvenirs. As James Fergusson wrote in 1880 “all the Buddhist caves were originally adorned with paintings, but in nine cases out of ten these have perished, either from the effects of the atmosphere... or from wanton damage done by ignorant men.”<sup>4</sup>

And yet, difficult to reach and falling apart, the caves of Ajanta were almost universally hailed as spectacular. Around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the study and production of art in India was being reviewed and radicalized. Different art movements were trying to redefine an essentially Indian artistic and cultural identity. In some ways, the British Raj encouraged this: the formation of a cultural identity did not seem to imply the formation of a national identity that would reject the British. There was much debate and infighting between different schools of thought and of art, each claiming to have found something that was essentially Indian and trying in different ways to deal with the centuries of British and Mughal influence over artistic thought. Some schools believed that there was no such thing as fine art in India, some believed that the crafts of India represented fine art and should be encouraged and expanded, and some believed that an Indian fine art distinct from crafts and distinct from European influence could be arrived upon.

Interestingly, however, almost every school of thought seized upon the Ajanta caves, remote and decaying, as symbolic of *something* quintessentially Indian. John Griffiths of the Bombay school was one of the first to try and copy the paintings, was a proponent of the Arts and Crafts movement in England, and was of the opinion that the crafts and decorative art of India should be expanded upon; in the caves, he saw decoration and in his copies he overemphasized elements to reflect European tastes. Later on, E. B. Havell, Abanindranath Tagore and Ananda Coomaraswamy, all extremely influential in the study of Indian art within India and in presentation of India to the western world, criticized much of John Griffith's work for its European bias. Yet they also seized

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<sup>3</sup>O. P. Agrawal, “Problems of Conservation of Ajanta Wall Paintings,” in *The Art of Ajanta: New Perspectives*, ed. Parimoo, Kannal, et al. (New Delhi: Books & Books, 1991), 380

<sup>4</sup>James Fergusson and James Burgess, *The Cave Temples of India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharial Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2000), 283

upon Ajanta, and when Abanindranath Tagore sent some of his best pupils to Ajanta to study and copy them, he went so far as to call this trip a “pilgrimage.”<sup>5</sup> In one of the more important critiques of Abanindranath and his style, an article in the magazine *Sahitya* criticized their modern work and some of the miniatures from which they drew inspiration on “the grounds of unnatural anatomy drawing and stylized gestures.” Yet they complimented a copy of the Ajanta frescoes produced by the school as showing a more natural beauty, implicitly conveying “the idea of Ajanta representing a more genuine and original face of Indian art.”<sup>6</sup>

Later on, Amrita Sher-Gil, seen by many as the most important modernist painter of India, continued this trend. She decried the work of She called the Bengal school of art lacking in substance but also said of the caves of Ajanta and Ellora that she had “for the first time since [her] return to India, learnt something from somebody else's work!”<sup>7</sup> And this trend continues today; the contemporary Indian artist Sudhir Patwardhan in an interview with Nathan Tuli cited Ajanta as a major influence on his and others art, but also that “there has not been a tradition built up to handle that influence” and “No great contemporary artist has been able to handle it.”<sup>8</sup>

That the caves of Ajanta are important to the establishment or reestablishment of Indian Artistic identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century seems like something that most can agree upon. However, what exactly is the source of this power, and how precisely did it manifest itself? This paper will attempt to trace some of the religious, cultural, and artistic reasons for its prominence, and also to illuminate on whom its influence was wrought, and to what effect.

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<sup>5</sup>Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 208

<sup>6</sup>Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 214

<sup>7</sup>Amrita Sher-Gil, *To Her Parents, 1936*. Letter, in Amrita Sher-Gil and Vivan Sundaram *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Self-Portrait in Letters & Writings* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2010), 267

<sup>8</sup>Sudhir Patwardhan, interview by Neville Tuli, in *Indian Contemporary Painting* (Ahmedabad: The Tuli Foundation for Holistic Education & Art, 1997), 357



## The Construction of Ajanta

### Politics, Patronage, and Religion

Excavations for the first group of caves began in the first or second century BCE.<sup>9</sup> The contemporary numbering of the caves is not chronological, but simply starts at the easternmost end and works its way counterclockwise; by this system, the major caves excavated at that time were those numbered 9, 10, and 12. They were excavated by *Theravada* or *Hinayana* Buddhists and in the aniconic period of Buddhist history; no images of the Buddha were painted or carved into the walls, and there were no representations of Bodhisattvas. There are some paintings on the walls that remain from this time, but they are dim and difficult to distinguish; many of them have been painted over. The Buddha was represented instead by symbols, for instance the wheel of *Dharma* or floral patterns.

Cave 12 is a *vihara*, or monastery. Its layout is quite simple: a rectangle lined with small rooms in which monks lived. There are some sculptural flourishes around the doorways, but otherwise it is quite bare, especially as compared with the Mahayana vihara present at the site. It was probably constructed later than the other two Hinayana caves. Caves 9 and 10 are *chaityagriha*, or *chaitya*, caves. This means that they were simply halls of worship. The chaityas at Ajanta and several of those at Ellora are of very similar plan, consisting of a hallway lined with columns terminating with a semicircular ending in which there is a *stupa*, large and hemispherical carved out of rock. These caves are significant for several reasons. Buddhist monks still regularly visit and worship within them; they bear inscriptions and some paintings from the time of their construction; and centuries later, artists working in the Mahayana tradition painted much of their interiors and carved beautiful facades for these caves. This repainting and carving was probably done around the same time as the other Mahayana caves were being excavated and worked on<sup>10</sup>, and the art is in a

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<sup>9</sup>Seth, *Indian Paintings*, 27

<sup>10</sup>Informational Placard, *Cave 10*, Ajanta Caves, Ajanta, Maharashtra

similar style.

Little is known about the history of these caves. An inscription in Cave 10 tells that it was the gift of a king Vasithiputra,<sup>11</sup> and that along with knowledge of the alphabet used to make the inscription allows certain guesses to be made. From similar sites, we know that most likely monks in this phase lived somewhat modestly, and perhaps set up and lived within more perishable structure in the nearby area. The stupa would be worshiped as reflecting or containing some part of the Buddha or his teachings, and would be the object of meditation.

In considering the artistry of Ajanta, the Hinayana caves would have little influence were it not for the paintings and sculptures of the later Mahayana time. Here, again, historical sources are thin. Much work has been done to discover who exactly made the caves; what dynasties were in power, and what was happening in this region of southern India at the time. This is a particularly interesting question due to the many caves that were left in various states of completion; some caves were abandoned after minimal excavations, some were mostly completed except for decoration, and some began to be lived in even before they were completed.<sup>12</sup> Scholars have relatively little solid evidence from which such information could be gleaned: several of the caves have inscriptions, but they tend only to mention names which aren't mentioned in any other history.

The general consensus however, is that they were completed in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, during the decline of the Vakataka empire, about which there is also little known. Some have made connections to the *Dasakumaracharita*, a novel written well over a century later about this period that contains some degree of historical fact. Professor Walter Spink, who has studied the caves for more than 50 years and represents perhaps the deepest knowledge of them, has used the inscriptions and the *Dasakumaracharita* alongside evidence stemming from minute details of the caves' construction to put together a complete and precise chronology of the construction of the completion of the caves and the downfall of the Vakataka empire. According to him, all of the more

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<sup>11</sup>Fergusson, *The Cave Temples of India*, 293

<sup>12</sup>Spink, "Ajanta in a Historical Context," 6

modern caves were excavated, carved and painted in the relatively short period from 462 to 481 CE, corresponding with the rule of the last great king of the Vakatakas, King Harishena, from 460 to his death in 477.<sup>13</sup>

The caves were in this theory excavated as the result of both the patronage of members of the Vakataka court (possibly including Harishena himself) and members of the feudatory states which controlled the region. During the period of construction, the area surrounding Ajanta was the focus of conflicts between two feudatory states of the Vakatakas: the Rishikas and the Asmakas. Upendragupta, who is referred to as the benefactor for Caves 17 through 20, was the king of the Rishikas and ruled the region surrounding Ajanta until his defeat by the Asmakas around 472. There followed a period of conflict in which control of the area was contested and work within the caves was halted. By 475, the Asmaka state controlled the Ajanta region and brought to it enough stability to allow the works to continue, save for those that were directly sponsored by the Rishikas, such as Caves 17 through 20. No inscriptions refer to a king of the Asmakas as giving direct patronage, although one in cave 26, a large and elaborate chaitya, says that the cave's construction was supported by the monk Buddhahadra, “attached in friendship (to the minister of the mighty king of Asmaka).”<sup>14</sup>

Throughout this period, the Vakataka Empire stayed out of the conflict, and seemed more or less unaffected by it. King Harishena was described by Spink as being, “at the very apogee of India's Golden Age...the greatest king in India and possibly in all the world.”<sup>15</sup> Spink further believes that Cave 1, which has some of the more impressive artwork, was the result of direct patronage by Harishena, thus explaining the fact that it is the only cave whose work was not interrupted by the conflict (although it, too, was temporarily stopped during the period from 472 to 475). Some other scholars disagree, referring to the fact that the rulers of the Vakatakas had

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 5

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.,11

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 5

historically been Vaishnavite and not Buddhist.<sup>16</sup> We do know that his chief minister Varahamihira was the patron of Cave 16, one of the most intricately painted caves<sup>17</sup>, and other cultural sponsorship

With Harishena's sudden and unexpected death in 477, the fall of the Vakataka Empire began. His son became king, but was not a strong leader, and the feudatory states began to grow in power. The excavations at Ajanta were brought to a stop by this newfound political instability, resulting in the number of incomplete excavations at Ajanta. The Asmakas, in particular, grew in power and ended up leading the insurrection that eventually toppled the Vakatakas in 530. With this final step, the stability of the Vakataka Empire was replaced by a period in which it was unsafe to walk the streets. Those monks who had been inhabiting the monasteries abandoned them, pilgrims no longer came to visit the chaityas, and the caves slowly faded from consciousness. For several hundred years they were still known of and spoken of; in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang wrote of Ajanta. After him, though, knowledge of the caves seems to have disappeared almost completely and they became overgrown, hidden by the grass and shrubs.<sup>18</sup>

## **The Arts and Artisans of Ajanta**

There are several distinct aspects of artistic mastery represented at Ajanta: the architecture, the sculpture, and the paintings. The paintings, however, are uniquely old while being extremely well preserved. The most impressive paintings (and, for that matter, the most impressive architecture and sculpture) are from those caves done in the Mahayana tradition, or by Walter Spink's timeline, those completed between 462 and 481 CE. Little is known about the artists

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<sup>16</sup>Karl Khandalavala, "The History and Dating of the Mahayana Caves of Ajanta," *Maharashtra Pathik* 2, no. 1 (1990): 19

<sup>17</sup>Seth, *Indian Painting*, 31

<sup>18</sup>Seth, *Indian Painting*, 27

themselves. It is likely that the artists came in from all over southern India to work on the caves, while they lived in the vicinity or in the caves themselves. Furthermore, they were likely ordained members of the monastic community, meaning the artwork they were producing came from a place of deep spiritual devotion.<sup>19</sup>

Painting and carving in these caves must have been extremely difficult, due to the dim lighting filtering through the entrances and the interruptions that each rainy season would bring. Additionally, monks would move into the vihara caves as soon as it was possible, as there is evidence of them living there even in caves that were unfinished; their daily lives presumably interfered to some effect upon the work of the artists. It is likely that the caves were illuminated merely by sheets of white cloth reflecting the outside sunlight, which due to the particular geography of the surrounding area was present for a relatively short part of the day.<sup>20</sup> The painters would first flatten the walls, leaving them slightly rough so as to allow for greater adhesion. Then a thin layer of plaster would be applied, consisting of powdered brick, fine dust, and fibers and husks of rice. This would be smoothed out and a uniform background painting would be applied. Lastly, designs would be drawn on the background and then they would be painted in.<sup>21</sup> The pigments used would be produced from products from the surrounding area, such as cinnamon for the reds. The only color not to be produced locally was the bright, piercing blue that was a product of imported lapis lazuli. This fresco style, known as *dry fresco*, is not a fresco in the sense of Michelangelo and other European fresco artists, where layers of wet plaster are painted upon with water-based pigments.<sup>22</sup> The style has been replicated much throughout Indian history, as can be seen, for instance, in the frescoes of the city of Jaipur. By the Spink's estimate, working in these conditions, it would take three to five years to complete each cave, from excavation to painting; by the estimate

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<sup>19</sup>Arrowsmith, *Repainting Ajanta*

<sup>20</sup>Khandalavala, "The History and Dating of the Mahayana Caves of Ajanta," 18

<sup>21</sup>Fergusson, *The Cave Temples of India*, 284

<sup>22</sup>Spink, "Ajanta in a Historical and Political Context," 7

of Khandalavala, it would take no less than 15.<sup>23</sup>

The painting itself varies, of course, from cave to cave. Only a handful of caves have paintings within that are preserved enough to be of note. In particular, Caves 1, 2, 16, and 17, all viharas, have excellently preserved sections on the walls, ceilings, and in some cases in the verandas. Originally, the paintings in these caves completely covered the interior walls and the ceilings, and for Caves 2 and 17, they remain almost completely intact. The ceilings are painted mostly non-figuratively, with a tile-like style which occasionally gives way to large, floral mandalas. On many of the tiles is some sort of geometric or floral motif. In some caves, their color composition seems to be black and white, with a dark background; looking closer, one can distinguish browns and other dark colors in addition to blacks, and accents of red and blue. Other caves are more obviously colorful and are treated more lightly, with whites and reds and light turquoises forming the backgrounds of the floral motifs.

Paintings on columns, when there were any, frequently continue in a very similar style the patterns and colors that are present on the ceilings. Human figures, which appear very rarely on the ceilings, do appear with an increased frequency on the columns, but they are basically solitary. A good example of this is the octagonal columns of the Theravada Cave 10, which were repainted with human figures: Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Jatakas, or scenes from the Buddha's previous lives.

The largest and most detailed paintings are on the expansive flat walls of the viharas. They, like the columns, take Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Jatakas as the main subjects and themes. There is the distinctive yellowing that resulted from repeated applications of varnish by artists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, attempting to conserve the paintings but ultimately worsening the situation.<sup>24</sup> There is also in some caves a blackening near the top of the walls, the result of oil lamps used by monks when

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<sup>23</sup>Karl Khandalavala, "The History and Dating of the Mahayana Caves of Ajanta," 18

<sup>24</sup>Agraval, "Problems of Conservation," 380

they were living in the caves.<sup>25</sup> On top of this there are large sections of the paintings that have fallen off or been worn away by bees, bats, and exposure to the elements, and chipped off as souvenirs by early visitors. Yet behind all this damage one can make out the paintings, in deep, earthy yellows and reds, and bright (albeit faded) blues and greens. The scenes portrayed have everything, from large, over-lifesized human figures, to large groups of people, buildings and mountains and lakes and jungle. The compositions expand and wrap around corners; Yashodhara Dalmia calls this “the mesmerizing synaesthetic wraparound quality of the paintings which seem to loom towards the viewer.”<sup>26</sup>

There is much that can be said about the qualities of these paintings, and much that make them respected and admired. The qualities of the lines are the first to be noticed, by everyone from Nandala Bose to the art-historian Nalini Bhagawat; hard-edged and definite, these lines make the paintings pop out and give the figures presence. The use of rhythm in the compositions makes them paintings particularly engaging; particularly, in some places, a wavy rhythm, which probably has its stylistic origins in the floral ornamentation sometimes used in aniconic Buddhism to represent the Buddha. This is known as *amaravel*, and “also symbolizes the continuous flow of life.”<sup>27</sup> In the portrayals of humans, there is a great emotional depth and variety, each face unique and sublimely human. There are people of all skin tones, body types, hair styles and stations, from kings to paupers, and wearing emotions from mourning to contentment, with subtle and telling lines.

An important aspect of the paintings, particularly from the standpoint of a modernist perspective on them, is their treatment of realism. On the one hand, the artists clearly had the potential for realism: perspective and shading are used in various aspects of the scenes, and the individual figures are often in a realist style. However, there are also clearly places where

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<sup>25</sup>Spink, “Ajanta in a Historical and Political Context,” 8

<sup>26</sup>Yashodhara Dalmia, *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Life* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2006), 78

<sup>27</sup>Nalini Bhagwat, “Ajanta Paintings: A Formal Analysis of Composition” in *The Art of Ajanta: New Perspectives*, ed. Parimoo, Kannal et al, (New Delhi: Books & Books, 1991), 288

abstraction is used. Figures are exaggerated and proportions are distorted to accentuate their emotions and movement. Buildings are flattened, and often just become a roof supported by pillars on either side of seated people. Despite the use of perspective in some places, “there is generally no attempt to create the effect of recession;”<sup>28</sup> large groups of people, for instance, become compressed on top of each other. In some cases, the abstraction becomes symbolic. One example of this is that at times figures are displayed standing atop cubes and bricks that seem somewhat out of place and are highly geometrical; these represent the Himalaya Mountains.<sup>29</sup> The effect of moving from realism to abstraction defines in many ways the style of the paintings, and becomes important for modernist painters, art-historians and art-critics in their discussion of Ajanta.

## **Ajanta in the Modern Era**

### **Rediscovery**

Overgrown and lost to history, the Ajanta caves were not rediscovered until British officers of the Madras army encountered them in 1819 while on a hunting trip. Due to their remoteness, they were initially visited infrequently, although their merits were quickly noted. General Sir James Alexander published the first significant article about the caves in 1830, based on his visit in 1826.<sup>30</sup> In 1828, they were visited by a Captain Greely, Mr. Ralph and Dr. J. Bird; Dr. Bird later published a piece on the caves in *Historical Researches* based on this visit, although Fergusson says of this piece that “the erroneousness of the author's opinions on Buddhism is only matched by the inaccuracies of the drawings that illustrate it.”<sup>31</sup> Fergusson himself presented a paper to the Royal Asiatic Society based on his trip there in 1839.<sup>32</sup> Knowledge of the caves was beginning to spread within India

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 289

<sup>29</sup>Fergusson, *The Cave Temples of India*, 285

<sup>30</sup>Sophia Gordon, “Monumental Visions: Architectural Photography in India, 1840-1901” (PhD dissertation, University of London, 2010), 27

<sup>31</sup>Fergusson, *Cave-Temples of India*, 281

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.



and within England.

However, by exposing the caves to the elements again, the discovery began a process of degradation of the caves. This, along with increasing knowledge of the art of Ajanta, prompted efforts to paint and preserve the images of the caves. The first such effort was that of Major Robert Gill.

## Major Robert Gill & the First Copies

Born to a London stockbroker, in 1825 Robert Gill joined the British army and by request was posted to India, where he would live for the rest of his life.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile (probably prompted in part by Fergusson's paper on the caves) in 1844 the Royal Asiatic Society alerted the East India Company to the fact that Ajanta and other cave temples of Western India were being neglected. The Company's Court of Directors in London wrote to the Governor General Lord Hardridge in Calcutta. The command made its way down the line and eventually it fell upon the shoulders of Major Gill, serving in the Madras Army at the time, to go to Ajanta and make drawings and plans of the layouts of the caves in addition to copies of frescoes.<sup>34</sup> Gill proved to be an excellent draftsman and after being invalided out of the army in 1853, he continued producing paintings of the caves until 1863, resulting in 27 canvases. Unfortunately, 23 of these burned without being photographed; one in a fire in the South Kensington Museum in 1885 and the rest earlier in the fire of the Crystal Palace in Sydenham in 1866.<sup>35</sup> He also took up photography, and contributed pictures to Fergusson's *Rock-Cut Temples of India* in addition to publishing a collection of his own: *One Hundred Stereoscopic Illustrations of Architecture and Natural History in Western India*. He continued living by the caves until his death in 1875.<sup>36</sup>

Through his artwork, displayed in both London and India, and his published works and collaborations with Fergusson, Gill proved to be extremely influential in the spread of knowledge and artistic respect for the Ajanta caves; the artistic merit of the caves began to be noted in wider circles. However, his legacy is not entirely a positive one. He was the first artist to try and “preserve” the paintings by applying varnish, which by Lady

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<sup>33</sup>Pauline Rohatigi and Graham Parlette, *Indian Life and Landscape by Western Artists: An Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings from the Victoria and Albert Museum: 17th to the Early 20th Century* (Mumbai: Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya, 2008), 311

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 313

<sup>35</sup>Gordon, “Monumental Visions,” 234-35

<sup>36</sup>Rohatigi and Parlette, “Indian Life and Landscape,” 313

Herringham's visit had noticeably yellowed them. Additionally, he 'Europeanized' his copies of the frescoes by applying shading and perspective in places where the originals lacked them, in an "attempt to alter Indian aesthetics to suit a provincial European taste."<sup>37</sup> This was a much larger trend in the British treatment of Indian arts, and a cause of much the debate surrounding the creation or rediscovery of an Indian artistic identity that was happening in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Major Gill was a minor player in this debate; the Ajanta caves, on the other hand, proved to be a major player.

## The Artistic Environment of Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century India

To understand the full impact of Ajanta, it is necessary to understand the context in which artistic exploration of the Ajanta caves took place, as well as the context in which an Indian artistic identity was being formed. The creation of art within India is of course nothing new, nor was discourse about arts and art forms. But with India under British control, a debate started forming within Britain about whether Indian art was on the same plane as European art. Additionally, the East India Company began in 1854 "a project of improving Indian taste as part of its moral amelioration."<sup>38</sup> As part of this project, art schools began to be established that taught European academic artwork. The first was the Calcutta School of Art, established in 1854; shortly later in the same year the School of Industrial Arts in Madras was founded. The Bombay School of Art, now titled the Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy (or Sir J J) School of Art, was founded in 1857, and then much later the Mayo School of Arts was founded in Lahore in 1878.<sup>39</sup>

The period of the founding of these schools corresponds with the rise of the Arts and Crafts movement and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in Britain, and the ideals conveyed by these two schools were highly influential in how the Indian governmental schools of arts were set up and run. The Arts and Crafts movement was founded in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in the ideas of John Ruskin, A. W. Pugin, both deploring the effects of industrialization on the quality of works it resulted in, and William Morris, who was a champion of handcrafted articles; its basic tenant was a return to handmade items of quality and a treatment of these products as artwork. It

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<sup>37</sup>Rupert Richard Arrowsmith, *Repainting Ajanta: the global impact of the Frescoes and their copies*, lecture given at Oxford University as a part of an exhibition titled "Indian Traces in Oxford," 0:26:07, March 3, 2011, accessed November 2, 2016, <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/repainting-ajanta-global-impact-frescoes-and-their-copies>

<sup>38</sup>Partha Mitter, *Indian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 173

<sup>39</sup>Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 60

was part of the inspiration for the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, founded by John Everett Millais, William Hunt, and Dante Rossetti “to recapture the basic principles of early Italian Art.”<sup>40</sup> The Arts and Crafts movement, accompanied by the Great Exhibition of 1851, a presentation of craft products from all over the world, increased interest in the crafts and decorative arts of India, while the revivalism of the Pre-Raphaelites inspired a similar revivalism of classical techniques within the teachers of the government schools.

## John Griffiths and the Sir J. J. School of Art

Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy was an industrialist, and through his influence, the school that would later bear his name began to teach technical skills of master draftsmen, industrial design, and crafts, as well as the techniques and styles European fine-arts that it was founded to spread. It was closely associated with the Victoria and Albert Museum, now known as the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, which was first set up to house replicas of those Indian pieces that were displayed at the Great Exhibition. Sir George Birdwood was a curator of the museum appointed in 1858, and he expanded the collection “to showcase the best in Indian craftsmanship and to instruct local taste in design and aesthetics.”<sup>41</sup> Birdwood was also one of the founders of the South Kensington Museum, which supplied the Sir J J School of Art with several professors. Despite this, the Sir J J School of Art was not the most crafts-oriented of the governmental art schools. In fact, throughout the country the same discussion of the merits of Indian craftsmanship was taking place, and it was the schools in Lahore and Madras that were ended up focusing more upon “the revival and the improvement of indigenous art-industries... while the schools at Bombay and Calcutta laid claims towards a more distinctive training in the 'fine arts'.”<sup>42</sup> This is the school the John Griffiths arrived at in 1864 with his companion John Lockwood Kipling.

John Griffiths was born in Wales in 1837, and was later educated at the Royal College of Art in London. After college, he worked at the South Kensington Museum alongside John Lockwood Kipling.<sup>43</sup> In 1864, they were both sent to work at the Bombay School of Art by the Indian Education Department. They served as Architectural Sculptor and Head of Decorative Painting under the direction of the then principal, G. W. Terry. The

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<sup>40</sup> Rohatigi and Parlette, “Indian Life and Landscape,” 327

<sup>41</sup> Informational Placard, *Industrial Arts Gallery*, Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai, Maharashtra

<sup>42</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 64

<sup>43</sup> Briony Llewellyn, "London. John Griffiths (1837-1918)," *The Burlington Magazine* 122, no. 926 (1980): 368, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.tufts.edu/stable/879989>

assignment was initially for only 3 years, but both spent the rest of their life living in India. Drawing them closer, both artists were strongly influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement and the associated Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in England; Kipling even had two Pre-Raphaelite artists as step-brothers: Edward Burne-Jones and Edward Poynter.<sup>44</sup>

Griffiths, with his background in Victorian academic art, and inspiration from the Arts and Crafts movement and the Pre-Raphaelites, lived, taught and produced art in India until his death in 1918. Throughout this period, through interaction with his students and Indian art in general, his style became a fusion of Indian and English, and he dissipated this style to the students of the Sir J J School of Art. Sir Birdwood called him “the founder of a new *native* and *indigenous* type of inductive art.”<sup>45</sup>

He was, however, relatively early in his stay in India when in 1872 he was directed to copy the Ajanta frescoes. After the fire at the Crystal Palace destroyed most of Major Gill's work, interest in another attempt to copy the paintings grew. Griffiths' superior, G. W. Terry, wanted to scrape the frescoes off the walls of Ajanta and send them to be displayed in London, but the Governor of Bombay decided that a project to copy the paintings would make more sense.<sup>46</sup> In 1872, he commissioned Griffiths to create this new set of copies. This turned out to be an extremely large project; whereas Gill had worked alone, John Griffiths brought an entire team of students and spent 13 years to produce over 200 paintings at a cost of £30,000.<sup>47</sup> He worked alongside students for the next several years to produce the copies. Each student probably worked by themselves on one painting at a time, taking about 5 months to make a single copy. In an unfortunate twist of fate, over one hundred of these copies perished in the 1885 fire at South Kensington Museum, but more than two hundred remain in the collection of the Victoria and Albert museum.<sup>48</sup>

These copies that were produced by him and his Indian students, however, displayed several of the same flaws as Gills did: the paintings were once again 'Europeanized', as evidenced by chiaroscuro and the use of

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<sup>44</sup> Rohatigi and Parlette, “Indian Life and Landscape,” 326

<sup>45</sup> Llewellyn, "London. John Griffiths (1837-1918)," 368

<sup>46</sup> Arrowsmith, *Repainting Ajanta*

<sup>47</sup> Divia Patel and Nicola Costaras, “Conserving the Copies of the Ajanta Cave Paintings at the V&A,” *Conservation Journal* 52 (2005), accessed November 28, 2016, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/journals/conservation-journal/issue-52/conserving-the-copies-of-the-ajanta-cave-paintings-at-the-v-and-a/>

<sup>48</sup> Patel and Costaras, “Conserving the Copies...”

perspective when the originals lacked it. The work is not done in the same style as Gills, but rather in Griffiths' fusion of European Academic styles with elements of Indian inspiration.<sup>49</sup> But the artwork of Ajanta did leave a lasting impact on the artwork of Griffiths and his students, who were some of the most influential and important artists working in India at the time, especially after Griffiths succeeded Terry as Principle of the Sir J. J. School. The copies were used as teaching materials within the schools, influencing everyone from painters to potters; the Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum has a collection of pottery from the Sir J J School shortly after Griffiths' expedition, with "designs and colors...inspired by the drawings at the Ajanta caves."<sup>50</sup> With respect to the art of Griffiths himself, as a specific manner in which the art of Ajanta changed his style, he began to use flat areas of subdued color as a common compositional style after his visits to Ajanta.<sup>51</sup> Not only was the idea of Ajanta as an important artistic monument rising, but aspects of the form and composition used were permeating a school of art more than a thousand years after it had been all but forgotten about.

Major Gill and John Griffiths, coming from European backgrounds, presented the paintings of Ajanta as having more realism, perspective and shading than the actual paintings possessed. From this fact, we can derive that these were perceived as positive qualities of the paintings, attractive and more digestible to those educated in the European style. When confronting art from another society, it is inevitable that parts of it will be unfamiliar and seem strange; in such cases, the familiar will be seized upon and analyzed to a greater extent. With the vocabulary of a Western art education, the realism within the frescoes of Ajanta would be the first to be analyzed and, due to its obvious qualities, extolled. But those from a British background were not the only ones to analyze the greatness of the Ajanta art work as emanating from its realist qualities.

In 1871, the art critic Shyama Charan Srimani published *Suksha Shilper Utpatti o Arya Fatir Shilpa Chaturi*, on the artistic heritage of India. It was in many ways a nationalist book, speaking of the beauty of what many other writers were labeling merely decorative arts from India's past. He did not set up a theory of spiritual appreciation of the works as the Bengali school would later do, but rather appealed to their realism. Within Ajanta, he focused on those details which exemplified the artists' mastery of realism: the perspective, shading, and

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<sup>49</sup>Arrowsmith, *Repainting Ajanta*

<sup>50</sup>Cabinet Label, *Industrial Arts Gallery*, Dr. Bhau Daji Lad Museum, Mumbai, Maharashtra

<sup>51</sup>Llewellyn, "London. John Griffiths (1837-1918)," 368

realistic anatomy.<sup>52</sup> The beauty of Ajanta, he found, did rest in its ability to directly portray reality.

## The Calcutta School of Art

While Griffiths was making his copies and teaching a European-Indian fusion of artwork, encouraging arts and crafts while still treating European art as in many ways superior, seeds of change were being sown in the Calcutta School. There were several main players in this side of the story: E. B. Havell, Abanindranath Tagore, and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy were all major thinkers, writers and art historians who endeavored to change British opinions as well as Indian opinions as to what is considered 'Indian' art.

Havell was an Englishman, classically trained at the Royal School of Art as well as studios in Paris and Rome. He was heavily involved with the governmental Schools of Art, being first the Principal of the Madras School of Industrial Arts from 1884 to 1892 before becoming the Principal of the Calcutta School of Art as well as the keeper of the associated Government Art Gallery from 1896 to 1906.<sup>53</sup> Throughout his time, his thoughts with regard to Indian art evolved, and he transitioned from being a teacher of classical European art to teaching and encouraging Indian arts, while becoming more important as an art historian and aesthete than as a teacher. The transition was slow; he, like Griffiths, was heavily influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement, and during his tenure in Calcutta began to teach more and more technical and craft skills.

Some of his evolution can be seen through his actions as principal of the school and Director of the Government Gallery of Art. When he inherited control of the gallery, it was a collection entirely of European art, presented as the epitome of fine-arts and well representative of European Academic painting, despite in fact being unimpressive even by the views of contemporary European critics.<sup>54</sup> His initial plan was to sell off much of the European work and replace it with a gallery displaying divided into two sections: one with reproductions of Byzantine and early pre-Renaissance art, and an Indian section, with samples of Ajanta and Mughal painting. Both of these were valued more as 'decorative' in essence, reflecting Havell's opinion at that time of art as a whole.

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<sup>52</sup>Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 209

<sup>53</sup>Partha Mitter, "Havell, Ernest Binfield (1861–1934)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, (Oxford: OUP, 2004). Online ed., ed. David Cannadine, 2004, accessed November 30, 2016, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37520>

<sup>54</sup>Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 64

What he actually ended up doing, by 1904, was to get rid of every piece of European art in the gallery.<sup>55</sup>

Havell's removal of European works from the gallery and decision to focus exclusively on Indian art corresponded with his 'discovery' of Abanindranath Tagore. In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he started noticing more and more the works Abanindranath, and considered him “the first 'genuine' Indian artist of modern times.”<sup>56</sup> When he was to make the choice for Vice-Principal of the school, he was initially looking for someone educated to a higher standard than what the Indian schools had to offer; in other words, someone educated in Europe. He ended up appointing Abanindranath to the post instead, despite his dearth of formal artistic education, because Havell believed that Abanindranath personified in many ways what modern Indian art should be about. Abanindranath did not fall under the category of the craftsman but rather produced works that, under Havell's view, were appreciable as 'fine art'. It seems that this was a true pivot point for Havell, as he began to encourage not only design and craftsmanship, but rather a 'higher' Indian art, defined by imagination and spirituality. He argued that western critiques of Indian art treated it as merely decorative; it is easy to connect this belief to the schism in government art schools that were teaching either traditional (decorative) craftsmanship or European 'fine' arts. Over time, he came to sympathize with the idea of Indian spirituality, and began to structure an understanding of Indian 'fine' art as being spiritual, specifically Hindu or Buddhist, in origin.

In 1906, he suffered a breakdown and returned to Britain, where he would live the rest of his life<sup>57</sup>; rather than retiring from the discussion, he began to write more. In *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, published in 1906, he first laid out his theories about the history of Indian and Hindu 'high' art in a complete manner. Later he published *The Ideals of Indian Art*, and both books dealt with Hindu religiosity and metaphysics as a foundation for Indian art. They put him near the center of a growing movement of Hindu nationalism, helped along by his association with Sister Nivedeta and the Tagore family. Although he thought of Ajanta as one of the major points of Indian artistic legacy, it was never at the forefront of his thoughts or research; on the other hand, in the followers he gained and in branches off from the Bengal school of art of which he was one of the founders, the Ajanta cave paintings played several major roles.

The discourse that he started was supported in many ways by the works of Abanindranath Tagore, who delved deeper into historical Indian texts for the justification of his claims. Abanindranath Tagore was criticized

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 147, 154

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 149

<sup>57</sup>Mitter, “Havell, Ernest Binfield (1861–1934)”

by some for picking sources to fit his ideology rather than discovering an ideology inherent in Indian history as he claimed; *Sandangum, or the Six Limbs of Indian Painting* was derived from a single six line stanza. Nevertheless, he was extremely influential as both an artist and an art historian in defining the Bengal nationalist art movement alongside Havell.

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy was another associated writer and thinker; half English and half Sri Lankan, he was raised in England and worked as a geologist. He returned in his mid- twenties to Sri Lanka and became invested in anti-Westernization, transitioning from geologist to “social reformer and ideologue.” In 1908, he published *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*, which celebrated the classical art work of Sri Lanka and attempted to outline a path towards Sri Lankan nationalism. It, too, was marked by the ideas of the Arts and Crafts movement, alongside concerns for the “propagation of Oriental art and aesthetics.”<sup>58</sup> With this book, he began a life-long career of attempting to raise pride in Indian and Sri Lankan art while also arguing the merits of those arts within the western world. He, like Havell, constructed an Indian artistic identity that spanned the ages, believing in “the continuity of the technical tradition in Indian painting at least from the Gupta period until almost the present day.”<sup>59</sup> Notably, some of the finest examples of Indian art created during the Gupta period are from Ajanta.

Coomaraswamy delivered many lectures across Europe as part of his project, and one person particularly impressed by these lectures was the artist William Rothenstein. Together, they set up the *Indian Society* in London to promote Indian artwork, and between the two of them they set several projects in motion. They introduced the eminent British modernist sculptors Jacob Epstein and Eric Gill to the importance of Indian arts. Traveling through India, Rothenstein wrote these two sculptors and described India as the most important place for inspiration, paying special note to the sculptures at Ajanta and Ellora, for any rock sculptor to visit – more important than Greece, usually considered European apotheosis of stone sculpture. Epstein and Gill did end up incorporating elements of the Indian aesthetic and spirituality into their works throughout their career as foundational modernist sculptors.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, through William Rothenstein and Coomaraswamy, Lady Herringham was connected to Abanindranath Tagore. This connection was to spawn the third major set of copies of Ajanta, directed by Herringham and executed by her alongside students of Abanindranath Tagore.

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 160

<sup>59</sup>Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Technique and Theory of Indian Painting* (Boston: The Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1934), 5

<sup>60</sup>Arrwosmith, *Repainting Ajanta*



## Lady Herringham's Copies

The project of Lady Herringham approached the copying of the Ajanta frescoes in a deliberate manner, from a similar view point to the thoughts of Coomaraswamy and Havell. They were attempting to appreciate the paintings on a level with more respect for the spirituality and intent of the original authors, trying to differentiate themselves from the approach of the Bombay School and John Griffiths. Abanindranath Tagore went so far as to call this project a 'pilgrimage' rather than the more usual 'study-tour.' Notably among the students were Nandalal Bose, who became one of the most important modernist painters in India, and Asit Kumar Haldar.

Haldar visited Ajanta twice as part of Herringham's team, and in 1913 he published his book *Ajanta* that places Ajanta squarely in a wider definition of "Indianness" in art. In the book, he lists two periods of Indian painting: one belonging to the Hindus and Buddhists, and one belonging to the Mughals. This opinion was familiar within the context of the Bengal school of art. He goes on to argue that Mughal painting was secular and ostentatious, the product of the wealthy court and a pursuit of casual pleasure. As such, despite the beauty of Mughal painting, it simply could not be put on the same level as the works at Ajanta and their tranquil spirituality.<sup>61</sup> Although Haldar focused more on Ajanta than other writers within the Bengal school, the broader theories outlined were analogous; in Havell's *Indian Sculpture & Painting*, he describes how Mughal art does not have the spiritual depth that would make it great.

With respect to the qualities of Ajanta, Haldar takes an opposing view to that of Griffiths, Srimani, or European Academics. In the figures of Ajanta, Haldar speaks of what Guha-Thakurta describes as "a deep inner ideal, [their] physicality sublimated by the greater force of the ideal."<sup>62</sup> Rather than dwelling on the realism of the works, Haldar describes them in a manner deliberately in contrast to western art, praising the merits of the line of the paintings and the spirituality, while leaving out references to the use of color and volume.

Nandalal Bose did not write a book about his travels, but he did go on to become one of the most important modernist Indian painters. Bose was a student of Abanindranath, but he did not fall entirely in line with Abanindranath's vision for 'Indian art.' Unlike Abanindranath, he believed that art should be more about originality

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<sup>61</sup>Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 209

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 209

and was uninterested in a return to folk art.<sup>63</sup> In 1923, he succeeded Haldar as the head of the art school Kala Bhavan at Santiniketan, the school set up by Abanindranath's uncle and Nobel laureate Rabanindranath Tagore that in many ways opposed the ideas of Abanindranath.<sup>64</sup> Because Bose attempted to be original in his works instead of looking back at Indian history and art as justification for his process, he did not elevate the artwork of Ajanta to the extent of Haldar. He did not put Ajanta at the center of an entire theory of all Indian art, but this is not to say that he wasn't influenced, and strongly, by the art work of Ajanta. Stylistically, the process of copying Ajanta frescoes made his brushwork less 'hazy' and ill-defined: the line work at Ajanta had encouraged "hard-edged figures and complex compositions reminiscent of these ancient paintings."<sup>65</sup> He also led a project at Santiniketan to create murals all over the schools, with both the idea and the style of the murals heavily influenced by Ajanta.

## Critics and Critiques of the Bengal School of Art

The Bengal School of Art was highly influential in early Indian Modernism, and its placement of Ajanta within a larger framework of Indian art, but it was not without criticism, and many later artists and art historians viewed Ajanta and Indian art differently.

The Bengali journal *Sahitya* and its editor Sureshchandra Samajpati found the arts produced by Abanindranath Tagore and his students to be too strange and experimental. Furthermore, it found those claims that they were authentically 'Indian' art and based within some sort of historical tradition that had clearly produced nothing of the sort ridiculous. It even went so far as to critique the classical Indian style of miniature paintings, cited as influences by artists both within and outside of Abanindranath Tagore's sphere, for not being as interesting or valuable as the artists portrayed them. Throughout all of this, it stuck to the conviction that proper art should be realist and representational, similar to Srimani. In articles that would critique the Bengal school, it would simultaneously compliment Ajanta (and copies of Ajanta produced by students of Abanindranath Tagore) as

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<sup>63</sup>Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-garde, 1922-1947* (London: Reaktion Books, Ltd., 2007), 82

<sup>64</sup>Neville Tuli, *Indian Contemporary Painting* (Ahmedabad: The Tuli Foundation for Holistic Education & Art, 1997), 189

<sup>65</sup>Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Nationalism*, 85

representing “the more genuine and original face of Indian art.”<sup>66</sup>

Additionally, there were critiques levied at the Bengal School from points of view concerned with their historicism rather than their lack of realism; Nandalal Bose had his falling out with Abanindranath Tagore, for instance, before going to Santiniketan. Amrita Sher-Gil was a prominent and some would say the most important Indian modernist, and she too was influenced by the caves. Her style did not belong to any particular school; she was half Indian and half Hungarian, and spent about half of her life living in Europe, where she was educated. When she moved to India, she was fascinated and enthralled with the country and colors, and began to paint in a style that was very much her own the 'primitive' in India, trying not to romanticize but instead capture the quiet dignity of the people. In late 1936, she embarked on a tour of India that was to change many aspects of her style and thoughts, as she encountered much art and inspiration from the Ajanta cave temples to the frescoes of Mattancheri Palace.<sup>67</sup> In Ajanta, she had a different experience than that of the Bengal School. She had previously been disappointed in a book by Syed Ahmad about his experience on Lady Herringham's project.<sup>68</sup> Upon getting there, she further distanced herself from the Bengal school, saying “Ajanta is painting with a Kernel, the painting of the Bengal School has only got a Shell. It is a lot of things built around nothing, a lot of inessential things and it would cease to exist if the inessential things were taken away from it.”<sup>69</sup> She rejected the views of the Bengal School as delving too much into the history of India and constructing theories and artwork that was somewhat artificial, rather than trying simply to engage with the people and artwork of India on their own terms. From Ajanta, she took inspiration in the treatment of people with the dignity that she was attempting, in the color pallet and in the emotionality of the entire project.

## Conclusion

There are further critiques, further important artists that were influenced by Ajanta, but those so far discussed form the backbone and basis for much of the further discourse. The art work of the Ajanta cave temples was intricately connected to the foundations of Indian modernism and the quest to define 'Indian' art. How or why

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 214

<sup>67</sup>Dalmia, *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Life*, 76-81

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 79

<sup>69</sup>Amrita Sher-Gil, *To Karl Khandalavala, 1936*. Letter, in Amrita Sher-Gil and Vivan Sundaram *Amrita Sher-Gil: A Self-Portrait in Letters & Writings* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2010), 271

it was considered influential aeries from person to person, from school of thought to school of thought. Some saw the works of Ajanta as profound examples of early realism, some saw the works as beautiful evidence of a spirituality that has lasted throughout the entire history of India, and some saw a simple dignity in the figures portrayed. This essay attempted to give a brief overview of the most important differing perspectives of the Ajanta caves, and how the Ajanta caves fit into academic and artistic discourse of the time. It has shown that the variety of styles of art in the caves, including the usage of realism and abstraction, played a major role in the discussions of Ajanta and the discussions of the merits of Indian art.

There is, however, much more to be said and to be explored. The works of the artist collectives of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the folk-art inspiration of Jamini Roy, and much, much more art in India has been touched by the influence of Ajanta. Myriad different perspectives on what makes or does not make art 'Indian' in essence exist, and many of the writings or constructions reference Ajanta in some way. More too could be said focusing on any particular person that mentioned in this essay; their thoughts and theories and their relations to the Ajanta caves are much more full of depth and detail than my brief summary has revealed. This essay attempted merely to give an overview, a history of the artwork of Ajanta and some instances of its lasting impact.

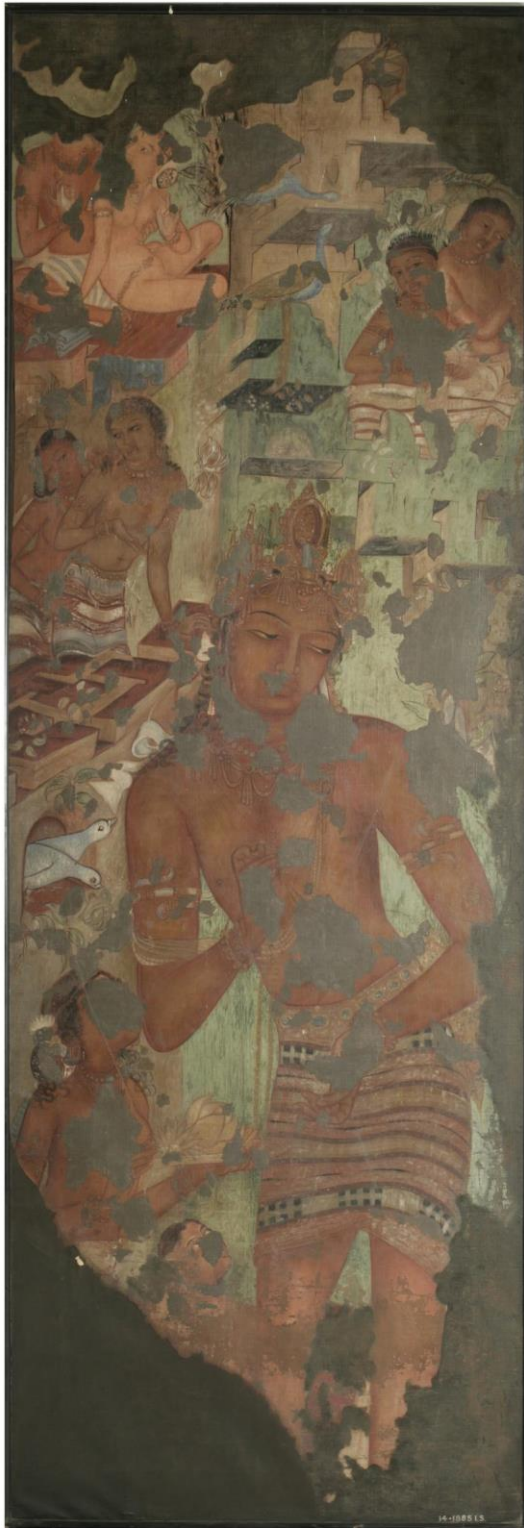
## Appendix: Pictures and Paintings



*Fig. 1*

Gill, Robert *Copy of painting inside the caves of Ajanta (Cave 1)*, ca. 1854. Oil on canvas. The Victoria & Albert Museum, London. The V&A Collections: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O115446/copy-of-painting-inside-the-oil-painting-gill-robert/>

This is one of the 4 surviving paintings by Major Gill copying an Ajanta fresco. This particular fresco is one of the better preserved and more complete paintings at Ajanta, on the left-hand side of Cave 1.



*Fig 2.*

Griffith, John. *Copy of painting inside the caves of Ajanta (Cave 1)*, 1878. Oil on Canvas. The Victoria & Albert Museum, London. The V&A Collections: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O115193/copy-of-painting-inside-the-oil-painting-griffiths-john/>

This is one of the copies produced by John Griffiths, also from a painting in Cave 1. Noteable in the background are the brick-like constructions that represent mountains.



*Fig. 3*

Majumdar, Kshitindranath. *Sakuntala and King Dushyanta*, ca. 1920. Painted watercolor on paper. The Victoria and Albert Museum, London. The V&A Collections: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O81883/sakuntala-and-king-dushyanta-painting-majumdar-kshitindranath/>

This is a painting by Kshitindranath Majumdar, a member of the Bengal art school. It portrays a distinctive influence of Ajanta, particularly in the faces and the floral ornamentation.



Sher-Gil, Amrita. *The Bride's Toilet*, 1937. Oil painting. National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi. WikiArt: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/amrita-sher-gil/bride-s-toilet-1937>

This is one of the more well-known pieces by Amrita Sher-Gil, produced shortly after her visit to Ajanta and tour of Southern India. The influence of the Ajanta frescoes is evident in the linework and the earth-toned color pallet, as well as within the composition itself.



## Glossary

*Ajanta* – An extensive cave system whose excavation started in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE and continued for several hundred years, containing Buddhist frescoes and sculptures.

*Abanindranath Tagore* – An influential part of the Bengal school of art and a member of the equally influential Tagore family, Abanindranath never actually visited the caves. He did, however, push other artists to, including Nandalal Bose.

*Ananda Coomaraswamy* – A philosopher from Sri Lanka whose work on the philosophy of art and Indian art in particular was extremely important. He was close with the Tagores and involved in the establishment and interpretation of the Bengal School of Art, along with being important his portrayal and interpretation of Indian Art History for western academics.

*Amrita Sher-Gil* – A half-Indian painter who was in a way outside of the other schools of art. She was very influenced by the works of Paul Gauguin, and made the female form a frequent theme in her work. She wrote excitedly about the power and influence of the Ajanta and Ellora caves.

*Caitya* – A sacred location associated with a relic, funeral pyre, burial or something else of religious significance. Many caves are referred to as *caitya* halls.

*Bengal School of Art* – An early modern school of Indian art that was very much influenced by the works of the Tagore family. Another important member of the group was Nandalal Bose. They existed during the late British Raj, and were in opposition to the academic art styles set up under colonial influence.

*Ellora* – Like Ajanta, Ellora is an extensive cave system full of temples and artwork. Unlike Ajanta, it contains references to Jainist, Buddhist, and Hindu faiths. It was constructed later than Ajanta, starting around the 7<sup>th</sup> century and continuing for a few hundred years.

*Ernest B. Havell* – Principal of the Calcutta School of Art (1896-1906), Havell was

*Fresco* – A style of painting which is done on top of a plaster surface. The Ajanta cave system is full of dry frescoes, where the paint was applied on top of dry plaster

*John Griffiths* – A second copyist of Ajanta, he worked with a teacher who wanted to scrape the walls of Ajanta and display them

*Nandalal Bose* – A pupil of Abanindranath Tagore and a very prominent figure in his own right, Nandalal Bose visited the Ajanta cave systems twice and supposedly was very influenced by their artworks.

*Major Robert Gill* – The first to make modern copies of the Ajanta Caves, he spent 18 years in Ajanta and produced 27 oil paintings in that time (all but two of which burnt in a fire in 1866). Damaged the caves by polishing and varnishing surfaces.

*Tagore Family* – A wealthy and artistic family based in Kolkata which included the three prominent painters Rabindranath (who was also a Nobel laureate for poetry; painting was a much later development for him), Abanindranath, and Gaganendranath Tagore.

*Vihara* – A monastery.

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