

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE CHITRASUTRA AND THE AESTHETICS OF INDIAN PAINTING

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ABSTRACT

Indian painting has historically integrated technical precision, proportion, line quality, color, and psychological resonance into a unified creative process. One of the paramount foundational texts for understanding this classical paradigm is the *Chitrasutra*, preserved within the third Khanda of the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*. This review article examines the theoretical tenets of the *Chitrasutra*—specifically its articulation of the six limbs of painting (*shadanga*), material preparation, line work (*rekha*), proportion (*pramana*), and emotional expression (*bhava*)—and correlates them with the surviving murals of the Ajanta Caves. Although chronological distinctions prevent treating Ajanta as a direct literal illustration of the later compiled text, both traditions reflect a shared aesthetic environment where empirical observation, structural discipline, and emotional communication converge. By synthesizing art-historical literature, technical conservation analyses, and classical Indian aesthetic theory, this paper demonstrates how technical execution and inner emotional life cooperate to establish an enduring foundation for Indian visual culture and sequential storytelling.

Keywords: Chitrasutra, Vishnudharmottara Purana, Indian aesthetics, Ajanta paintings, bhava, pramana, line quality, tempera technique, mural art.

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian artistic traditions have historically treated visual elements—such as line, proportion, color, and emotional expression—not as isolated formal concerns, but as interconnected components of a holistic creative act. Traditional Indian art theory posits that technical skill, and spiritual or emotional depth must work in tandem to produce a successful work of art

(Kramrisch, 1928; National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], n.d.). Central to understanding this philosophical and technical framework is the *Chitrasutra*, the seminal treatise on painting embedded within the third Khanda of the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*. Rather than functioning merely as decorative instruction, the *Chitrasutra* provides a comprehensive methodology covering surface preparation, pigment chemistry, proportional systems, spatial composition, and psychological expression (Shanker, 2022).

For contemporary art and animation students, the *Chitrasutra* offers profound pedagogical insights into studio practice. Core creative challenges—such as staging a figure within a given frame, utilizing contour lines to convey weight and volume, maintaining proportional balance, and instilling life-like emotion into a character—were rigorously analyzed by ancient Indian theoreticians (Coomaraswamy, 1934). Even though the cultural and historical milieu of ancient Sanskrit treatises differs significantly from modern fine arts education, the fundamental inquiry remains constant: how can a two-dimensional image achieve psychological depth, visual plausibility, and emotional resonance?

This paper critically reviews the *Chitrasutra* with specialized attention to material technique, line quality (*rekha*), proportion (*pramana*), and emotional state (*bhava*), utilizing the Ajanta cave murals as a primary visual case study (Singh & Arbad, 2014; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). It is essential to contextualize this comparison historically: the Ajanta murals belong predominantly to the 5th and 6th centuries CE under the Vakataka dynasty, while the painting chapters of the *Vishnudharmottara Purana* reached their codified textual form slightly later (Spink, 2005). Consequently, Ajanta is best understood as a peerless visual manifestation of an artistic culture wherein observation, sculptural modelling, expressive gesture, and narrative composition had already achieved absolute maturity, long before being systematically codified in theoretical literature (Swaminathan, n.d.).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: HISTORIOGRAPHY, TEXTUAL TRANSMISSION, AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SCHOLARSHIP

The historiography of Indian painting theory and its empirical manifestation at sites like Ajanta spans over a century of multidisciplinary scholarship, bridging classical Sanskrit philology, archaeology, and art history. The foundational milestone in textual scholarship was established by Stella Kramrisch in her pioneering translation and commentary, *The Vishnudharmottara: Part*

III, A Treatise on Indian Painting and Image-Making (1928). Kramrisch's work rescued ancient Indian aesthetic texts from obscurity, integrating them into modern art-historical discourse and demonstrating that classical Indian painting possessed a sophisticated, highly articulate theoretical structure rather than relying purely on intuitive craftsmanship (Kramrisch, 1928). This foundational textual analysis was subsequently expanded by Ananda Coomaraswamy (1934), whose studies on traditional Indian painting and *silpa* texts illuminated how canonical rules governed both sacred imagery and courtly visual culture.

Building upon textual foundations, subsequent scholarship explored the practical realities of ancient Indian mural techniques and chronological frameworks. Twentieth-century epigraphical and archaeological investigations—most notably the monumental documentation efforts by Ghulam Yazdani (1930–1955) and later comprehensive chronological studies by Walter M. Spink (2005–2006)—transformed academic understanding of Ajanta's development (Spink, 2005). Spink's rigorous epigraphic research proved that Ajanta's magnificent Mahayana monuments (such as Caves 1, 2, 16, and 17) were carved and painted during a concentrated burst of imperial patronage under the Vakataka king Harishena. Concurrently, technical analyses by institutions such as the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA, n.d.) and studies by researchers like Singh and Arbad (2014) examined ancient Indian painting recipes, elucidating the complex mineral pigment palettes, organic binding media, and clay-based plaster grounds utilized by muralists.

Furthermore, art historians such as C. Sivaramamurti (1970) integrated textual canons like the *Chitrasutra* and *Natya Shastra* with extant visual monuments, establishing how indigenous concepts of *shadanga* (six limbs of painting), *bhava* (emotion), and *rasa* (aesthetic relishing) manifest in actual practice (NCERT, n.d.). Recent scholarship, including studies by Shanker (2022), continues to analyze how the philosophical underpinnings of the *Chitrasutra* govern visual representation, proving that ancient Indian artists harmonized strict canonical proportions with immense narrative and psychological flexibility. This review builds upon these established scholarly pillars, synthesizing textual theory, technical materiality, and visual execution.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, text-based, and analytical methodology designed to evaluate existing secondary literature, archaeological excavation records, art-historical scholarship, and

technical conservation reports (Kramrisch, 1928; Singh & Arbad, 2014). Rather than conducting primary archaeological fieldwork or empirical laboratory testing in situ, the investigation relies on systematic source triangulation, textual criticism, and formal visual analysis.

The investigative framework is structured around four core analytical stages:

Textual and Historiographical Curation: Critical review of primary textual descriptions found within the *Chitrasutra* chapters of the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, utilizing established scholarly translations and commentaries (Kramrisch, 1928; Shanker, 2022).

Comparative Iconographic and Stylistic Cross-Referencing: Systematic examination of visual and compositional paradigms across major painted monuments at Ajanta (specifically Caves 1, 2, 16, and 17), cross-referencing them against classical aesthetic principles such as *pramana*, *rekha*, and *bhava* (Swaminathan, n.d.; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.).

Technical and Material Synthesis: Evaluation of scientific studies concerning ancient Indian mural recipes, plaster technology, organic binders, and mineral pigment identification to understand the physical realities of rock-cut wall painting (IGNCA, n.d.; Singh & Arbad, 2014).

Pedagogical and Fine Arts Application: Critical synthesis connecting classical aesthetic theory to contemporary studio practice and visual storytelling for art students.

4. TECHNIQUES, LINE, PROPORTION, BHAVA, AND AJANTA

Painting Technique and Preparation

The *Chitrasutra* places significant emphasis on the physical preparation required before undertaking a painting. Ground preparation was considered an integral part of the creative process rather than a mere mechanical preliminary (Kramrisch, 1928). Ancient technical descriptions mandate carefully layered plaster grounds, smoothing, and priming to ensure longevity. Scientific studies of Indian mural traditions have closely correlated these textual prescriptions with the actual physical remains at Ajanta, revealing the sophisticated use of clay-based grounds, organic binders, vegetable fibers, and vibrant mineral pigments (Singh & Arbad, 2014). This technical foundation demonstrates that classical Indian muralists possessed deep metallurgical and material expertise, ensuring that delicate tempera pigments bonded securely onto curved basalt surfaces (IGNCA, n.d.).

Line as a Structural and Expressive Element

Line (*rekha*) holds supreme authority in the *Chitrasutra* tradition (Coomaraswamy, 1934). Drawing was never treated merely as a bounding contour applied after a form was conceived; rather, it was the primary vehicle through which form materialized. A disciplined, confident line could delineate anatomical boundaries, convey weight, separate overlapping figures, and establish a rhythmic flow across the pictorial surface. As noted in analyses of early western Indian mural traditions, darker contours and fluid strokes cooperate directly with tonal shifts to give two-dimensional figures an illusion of sculptural volume and tactile presence (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980).

Proportion and the Organisation of the Figure

Pramana, or proportion, forms another vital pillar of the *Chitrasutra* (Shanker, 2022). The human body is understood through precise proportional ratios between anatomical segments. However, the objective was never sterile mathematical exactitude; instead, proportion provided a flexible framework to structure figures so they appeared harmonious and suited to their narrative context. Proportions could be intentionally adjusted to reflect status, spiritual importance, or compositional emphasis (Swaminathan, n.d.). At Ajanta, proportion governs dynamic bodily postures—bending, twisting, and overlapping—ensuring that individual figures remain legible while contributing to the sweeping rhythmic cadence of the entire mural (Spink, 2005).

Bhava: Giving Emotional Life to the Image

Among the six limbs of painting (*shadanga*), *bhava* represents the emotional and psychological core of classical Indian art (Sivaramamurti, 1970). *Bhava* transcends facial mimicry, encompassing the entire somatic language of the figure—including the gaze, hand gestures (*mudras*), body postures (*bhargas*), and relational dynamics with surrounding characters, flora, and fauna. In narrative compositions, where written dialogue is absent, *bhava* empowers visual storytelling. Subtle tilts of the head or communal gestures communicate grief, devotion, or authority with quiet eloquence. When combined with expressive color palettes and tonal modulation, *bhava* transforms technical execution into a deeply empathetic visual experience.

5. PROPORTION, COMPOSITION, AND BHAVA IN AJANTA PAINTING

PROPORTION AND COMPOSITION AT AJANTA

At Ajanta, proportion (*pramana*) is intimately tied to spatial composition and narrative hierarchy (Spink, 2005). The artists did not adhere to a rigid, mechanical scale; instead, figures were scaled and positioned dynamically to reflect their spiritual or dramatic significance within the story. Central protagonists in Jataka narratives or divine icons like the Bodhisattvas are rendered with majestic presence, while secondary attendants and animals are arranged in rhythmic counterpoint (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.).

Compositionally, Ajanta utilizes continuous narration, wherein multiple chronological episodes of a story unfold across a single wall space without vertical partitions. Spatial depth and relief are achieved not through Western single-point perspective, but through overlapping figures, diagonal body axes, varied floor planes, subtle tonal gradients, and foreshortening (Swaminathan, n.d.). This sophisticated organizational matrix guides the viewer's eye smoothly across complex narrative sequences while maintaining an overarching decorative harmony.

Bhava in Ajanta Painting

Ajanta offers some of the most compelling visual evidence of *bhava* in global art history (Sivaramamurti, 1970). Emotional resonance is distributed across the entire body—through expressive hand gestures (*mudras*), tilted heads, gentle body bends (*bhargas*), and reciprocal gazes between characters—rather than relying solely on facial expressions. The collective reactions of surrounding figures amplify the emotional atmosphere of the primary narrative (NCERT, n.d.).

This nuanced somatic language allows viewers to instantly comprehend psychological states such as compassion, grief, devotion, or royal authority without requiring textual explanation. By harmonizing physical grace with interior emotional depth, Ajanta elevates decorative storytelling into a profound psychological experience.

6. CONNECTING CHITRASUTRA AND AJANTA

Correlating the *Chitrasutra* with the Ajanta murals requires acknowledging important chronological distinctions: the peak phase of Ajanta painting largely predates the formal codification of the *Vishnudharmottara Purana* (Spink, 2005). Consequently, the texts and murals should not be viewed as a manual-and-product relationship, but as expressions of a continuous, highly refined aesthetic culture (Kramrisch, 1928).

The six limbs of painting (*shadanga*) provide an exceptional interpretive lens for analyzing Ajanta (Sivaramamurti, 1970). *Rupabheda* (differentiation of forms) is visible in the diverse renderings of humans, deities, animals, and natural flora. *Pramana* (proportion) governs the harmonious structure of bodies within complex architectural compositions. *Bhava* (emotion) and *Lavanya-yojana* (graceful infusion of beauty) manifest in the exquisite gestures and emotional transparency of the murals. *Sadrishya* (likeness and visual plausibility) and *Varnikabhanga* (artistic handling of color and brushwork) are evident in the masterful tempera techniques and volumetric shading preserved on the cave walls (Singh & Arbad, 2014).

Comparing the two demonstrates that classical Indian aesthetic philosophy did not treat technique and emotion as separate domains. Technical discipline—whether in line quality, plaster preparation, or color modulation—served precisely to make inner psychological states and spiritual truths visible to the viewer. For a contemporary art and animation student, this synthesis provides an enduring lesson: formal rules and technical mastery do not restrict creativity; they provide the essential scaffolding that elevates imagination into timeless art.

7. KEY FINDINGS

The synthesis of textual analysis from the *Chitrasutra* and empirical case studies from the Ajanta murals reveals several critical findings regarding the nature of classical Indian painting:

Inseparability of Technique and Expression: The *Chitrasutra*'s articulation of the six limbs (*shadanga*) confirms that classical Indian art education did not separate technical proficiency from emotional intent. Surface preparation, color handling (*varnikabhanga*), and formal resemblance (*sadrishya*) were treated as foundational vehicles necessary to successfully manifest inner emotional states (*bhava*) and aesthetic grace (*lavanya-yojana*) (Kramrisch, 1928; NCERT, n.d.).

Sophisticated Material Engineering in Basalt Architecture: Empirical studies of Ajanta's surviving murals disprove the notion that ancient Indian wall paintings were executed haphazardly. The use of specialized mud-plaster grounds mixed with organic fibers and finished with a smooth lime-wash priming layer demonstrates an advanced technological understanding of how to anchor tempera pigments onto porous, curved volcanic basalt surfaces (IGNCA, n.d.; Singh & Arbad, 2014).

Expressive Realism over Optical Naturalism: Both the *Chitrasutra* and the Ajanta paintings demonstrate a sophisticated system of proportion (*pramana*) and volumetric modelling that prioritizes expressive vitality (*prana*) over rigid mechanical copying or European single-point perspective. Figures are dynamically adjusted in scale, posture, and gesture to serve narrative hierarchy and psychological impact (Spink, 2005; Swaminathan, n.d.).

Codification of Visual Storytelling: Ajanta serves as a masterclass in continuous narrative execution, where complex moral and spiritual narratives from the Jataka tales are communicated across a unified wall surface through coordinated gestures, eyelines, and group dynamics—embodying the theoretical emphasis on *bhava* as a shared, relational experience (Sivaramamurti, 1970; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.).

8. CONCLUSION

The *Chitrasutra* of the *Vishnudharmottara Purana* remains an invaluable cornerstone for understanding traditional Indian painting (Kramrisch, 1928). Its importance lies not merely in its provision of practical instructions for materials, proportion, and composition, but in its holistic integration of technical discipline with emotional and spiritual expression. The articulation of the six limbs demonstrates that creating a successful image requires the harmonious balance of structure, likeness, aesthetic beauty, and psychological depth (NCERT, n.d.).

The Ajanta Caves provide a magnificent visual testament to these enduring principles (Spink, 2005). Featuring fluid line work, sophisticated tonal modelling, dynamic spatial organization, and profound emotional nuance, Ajanta exemplifies the highest peaks of classical Indian mural art (Singh & Arbad, 2014; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.). Although historical chronology indicates that Ajanta predates the formal textual compilation of the *Chitrasutra*, studying them in tandem reveals a shared continuum of artistic thought where theory and practice illuminate one another.

For a contemporary art and animation student, this synthesis offers a vital lesson: disciplinary structure and technical knowledge do not stifle creativity; rather, they provide the essential framework that supports an artist's imagination and emotional expression. By viewing Ajanta and the *Chitrasutra* through this critical lens, the murals transcend their status as ancient religious artifacts, emerging as vibrant, highly developed works where line, proportion, color, movement, and emotion unite into a timeless visual language

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