Ajanta Caves

Located in a horseshoe-shaped escarpment in the hills of the Deccan plateau, near the city of Aurangabad, the site of Ajanta was initially settled in the 1st century BC by Hinayana Buddhists who excavated two prayer halls (chaityas) and residential accommodation (viharas). With the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism during the 5th century, new caves were excavated.

The 30 caves on the site are especially renowned for their paintings which illustrate a wide range of Buddhist subjects. The life of the Buddha is shown many times, but it is the paintings of his previous existences (jatakas) that are most remarkable. These crowded, large scale compositions vividly depict the life of contemporary royal courts including the bejewelled figures of princes and their consorts together with servants, attendants and musicians. Sculptures also illustrate Buddhist themes, especially jataka stories and are extremely refined. The sensitive modelling and delicacy of the carving point to the influence of the Gupta tradition of northern India. Figures of bodhisattvas, nature spirits (yakshas) and guardians reflect Mahayana doctrines.

The caves include rock-cut assembly halls and temples featuring stupas or chaityas. In Cave 26, for example, a seated figure of the Buddha is set into the side of a chaitya. The ribbed roof is modelled in imitation of curving wooden timbers.

Ajanta is one of the few surviving examples of early mural painting and its decorative and iconographic prototypes provided inspiration for the Buddhist art of Tibet, Nepal, Central Asia, China, Japan and South-East Asia.
Facade of Buddhist cave at Ajanta, John Huntington
Relief carving, entrance to Cave 19, Ajanta. Photograph by John Clarke, 2009
Interior of Cave 26 at Ajanta, John Huntington
Standing Buddha, entrance to Cave 19, Ajanta. Photograph by John Clarke, 2009
Mural painting of Padmapani, 6th century, Cave 1, Ajanta, John Huntington
Relief carving, Cave 26, Ajanta. Photograph by John Clarke, 2009
Temptation of Mara, painting of mural in Cave 1, Ajanta, 1875-1876, Museum no. IS.13-1885
Facade, Cave 19, Ajanta. Photograph by John Clarke, 2009
Bodhisattva Vajrapani, painting of mural in Cave 1, Ajanta, 1872-1873 Museum no. IS.11-1885

Standing Buddha on stupa, Cave 26, Ajanta. Photograph by John Clarke, 2009