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PAINTINGS FROM AJANTA CAVES



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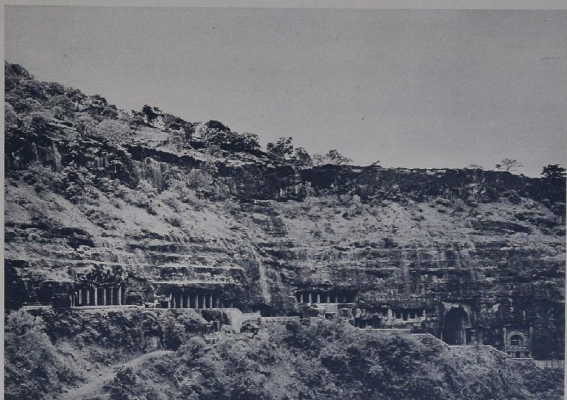
PAINTINGS FROM AJANTA CAVES

INTRODUCTION

BY

MADANJEET SINGH

PUBLISHED BY THE NEW YORK GRAPHIC SOCIETY
BY ARRANGEMENT WITH UNESCO



I should like to congratulate Unesco on this volume on Ajanta, the first to be devoted to Asian art in the Unesco World Art Series. Ever since the Ajanta frescoes were rediscovered and became generally known, they have exercised an increasing influence on our thought and on Indian art generally. They bring out not only the artistic traditions of fifteen hundred years ago or so, but make vivid the life of those distant periods. The women of Ajanta are famous. History becomes human and living and not merely a record of some distant age which we can hardly understand. Thus the appeal of Ajanta is not merely to the artist or the expert, but to every sensitive human being. Anyone who would understand the past of India must look at these frescoes which have exercised such a powerful influence not only in India but in distant countries also. If I were asked to name three or four places of paramount interest in India, which give some glimpse into India's mind in successive ages, I would mention Ajanta as one of them.

I, therefore, welcome this production and congratulate not only Unesco but my young colleague, Madanjeet Singh, who has brought his ability and labour to the performance of this task.

JAWAHARLAL NEHRU



The rock-cut temples of Ajanta are situated near the source of the Waghora River in the State of Hyderabad, India. Here, in the pre-Christian era, Indian artists, slowly, laboriously but patiently, chiselled the steep precipitous crust of the rocks and through the centuries laid the foundation of the great art tradition of Ajanta. The twenty nine shrines and sanctuaries, excavated by Buddhist monks in the course of several centuries, emerged from their millennial oblivion in 1819, when some soldiers by chance discovered their existence. In 1829, a description of the rock cut temples and of their exquisite wall paintings first appeared in the « Transactions of the Royal Asian Society », and in 1843 an authoritative account by Fergusson brought into relief the importance of the discovery. Unfortunately, only a few caves now retain, in varying degrees of preservation, the wall paintings that once adorned all the caves. Since their discovery, several efforts have been made to record them. The first attempt to make facsimiles of all the paintings was made by Robert Gill of the Madras Army, but unluckily all except five perished by fire in the Crystal Palace at Sydenham where they were on exhibition in 1866. In 1875, Griffiths, with the help of students of the Bombay School of Arts, continued the work, and, subsequently in 1896, edited for the Government of India « The paintings in the Buddhist caves of Ajanta ». Another volume entitled « Ajanta Frescoes » by Lady Herringham, appeared in 1915, published by the India Society, and the most recent and comprehensive work on the Ajanta paintings, is « Ajanta » written by G. Yazdani, former Director of Archaeology, Hyderabad, Deccan, and published in 1933.

This album, the first of the UNESCO series to be devoted to Asian art, contains thirty-two reproductions in colour, and does not profess to be a comprehensive survey of the vast domain of Ajanta paintings. It is intended only to give a broad outline of an art which holds a supreme position in Asian art history. The paintings of Ajanta have for Asia and the history of Asian art, the same outstanding significance that Italian frescoes have for Europe and the history of European art. By land or by sea, the art tradition of Ajanta, bound up with the history of Buddhism in its successive phases, gradually spread out towards countries such as Indochina, Indonesia and Malaya, Korea and Japan. In China, it directly influenced and stimulated the art of the T'ang dynasty, and the discovery of frescoes in Central Asia, in Khotan, at Turfan, at Tun-huang, have only increased the interest inspired by the Ajanta paintings. Historically, the caves of Ajanta are associated with the influential Vakataka dynasty of Berar, allies and relations of the Gupta dynasty under whose patronage Indian

painting and sculpture reached new heights giving the name the « Golden Age of the Guptas » to this period. Although the imperial supremacy of the Guptas lasted only from 320 A.D. to little beyond 495 A.D., the renaissance in art which they ushered in continued into the 6th century A.D. Painting in the Ajanta caves, however, was already a developed art much before the Gupta age. Paintings in cave No. X demonstrate this. But like most other arts flourishing under the Guptas, the Ajanta paintings reached their maximum height of glory and splendour in the fifth century A.D., as shown by the elegance of architecture and the vigour of design and colour in cave No. XVI (which bears the name of Vakataka King Harisena who ruled in the last quarter of the fifth century A.D.). Afterwards, with the sudden downfall of the Gupta supremacy and with the rise of a new dynasty in the Deccan, a decline set in so that by the eighth century A.D. (as represented by paintings in Ellora caves), the art of painting had lost all its vigour, grace and vitality.

In the period between the second century B.C. and the end of the sixth century A.D., when the Ajanta masters were busy creating works of art that were to revolutionize not only the Indian conception of art, but that of all Asia, divergencies in the trends of Buddhist philosophical thought were also having their impact on society. It was a period when the Hinayana (the « lesser vehicle conception » of Buddhist philosophy) was being challenged by Mahayana (the « greater vehicle conception »), which saw in Buddha not a mere teacher but a being, eternal and divine, proceeding from the infinite, who came to sojourn among men for their salvation. At the same time, an intellectual transition in Brahmanism too was beginning to have a sway on the imagination of the people. But the fundamentals of Ajanta art concepts did not undergo any radical change.

It is now generally accepted on the basis of palaeographic and other evidence that the caves date from the second century B.C. to about the end of the sixth century A.D. According to Fergusson and Burgess, caves Nos. IX, X, XII and XIII are the earliest and must have been excavated before the commencement of the Christian era. Luders, on paleographic evidence, has placed cave No. X as the oldest and as belonging to the middle of the second century B.C. Caves VI to VIII are placed as belonging to the period between the fifth and the end of the sixth century A.D.

The caves are of two main types — the Viharas (monastery or living caves) and Chaityas (cathedral or assembly caves). Architecturally, they are said to be rock-cut replicas of the wooden architecture of the day. The Great Chaitya, of which caves Nos. IX and X are examples, seem to have been derived from the apsidal halls of the

secular communities and guilds which are mentioned in early Buddhist literature. They have a rectangular portico and a nave with side aisles in the form of an apse at the end. On the other hand, the living caves or Viharas are cut in the style of four-sided monasteries comprising a simple central hall with cells along three sides, and provided with stone beds. According to G. Yazdani, this plan was maintained under the Hinayana school which seems to have continued in the Deccan until the third century A.D. But later, under the influence of the Mahayana school in the fourth century A.D., certain representational aspects of the painting and sculpture necessitated the excavation of niches in the aisles and other prominent parts of the Chaityas, for the placing of deities. Similarly, a change in the original plan of the Vihara was brought about by the introduction of corridors on all four sides of the main hall and a shrine with an ante-chamber at the end. To give an idea, the plan and dimensions of just one Vihara and one Chaitya may be briefly mentioned. The Vihara cave No. I comprises a veranda, a shrine and a central hall. The veranda is 64 feet long, 9 feet 3 inches wide and 13 feet 6 inches high. It has a cell at each end, and a door in centre which leads into the central hall which is 64 feet square. The ceiling is supported by a colonnade of 20 pillars surrounded by aisles 9 feet 6 inches wide. The hall leads into an ante-chamber 10 feet by 9 feet and onward into the shrine which is about 20 feet square. There are fourteen cells in the interior of the cave, one on either side in the front aisle and four in the right, left and back aisles. The Chaitya cave, however, has no cells and comprises, as for instance in cave No. X, a big assembly hall with barrel shaped roof supported by 39 pillars dividing the aisles from the nave. The dimensions of the hall are 95 feet 6 inches long, 41 feet wide and 36 feet high.

The main theme of the Ajanta paintings centres round the Jataka stories, the legends of Buddha's reincarnations. Human life, in the crowded drama of love, compassion, happiness, yearning, death, suffering and sacrifice, is illuminated by a glow of religious feeling dominated by a sense of transience of existence and profound piety. The multitude of variegated Jataka scenes, of life on earth, of love and of the pomp and pleasures of kings' courts, merely form the external settings of the great beings, the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas, who, in their graceful bodies and significant attitudes epitomise wisdom and understanding. In the intermingling of human beings, plants, flowers and animals there is a feeling of a deep and intimate spiritual kinship among all forms of life. However absorbing or distracting the mortal life in the spectacular procession of Ajanta paintings may appear, the cardinal conception of virtue and a broad humanitarianism transcends all and through simple stories such as, for

instance, in Sibi Jataka (cave No. I), the profound tenets of Buddhist thought are conveyed. According to Sibi Jataka, a hawk was once chasing a pigeon who, unable to escape from his enemy, flew and took shelter with the king of the Sibis. This king was no other than the Bodhisattva. The hawk came to the king and demanded the surrender of the pigeon as his lawful prey. The Great Being, in order to redeem the life of the pigeon who in dire distress had so confidently taken refuge with him, cut out an equal weight of flesh from his own body, gave it to the hawk and thus saved the pigeon from death. Similar sentiments are expressed by Slokas (or verses) in some of the caves, such as the one in cave No. II which Luders identified as being taken from Ksanti Jataka in Arya Sura's Jatakamālā.

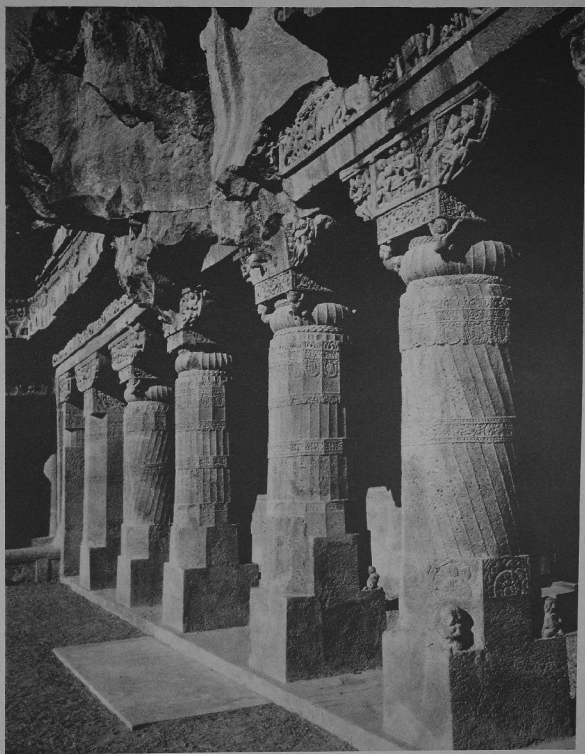
Alamkṛyante Kusumair Mahāruhās tadidṛḡapais
 toyavilambino ghanāḥ
 sarāṁsi mattabhramaraiḥ saroruhair guṇair
 vīśesādhigatais tu dehinaḥ

«Blossoms are the ornaments of trees, it is flashes of lightning that adorn the big rain clouds, the lakes are adorned by lotuses and waterlilies with their intoxicated bees: but virtues brought to perfection are the proper ornaments of living beings».

The simplicity of the subject matter of the Ajanta paintings is paralleled by the technique adopted for the preparation of the surfaces and the colours used. It is a remarkable instance of how great works of art have been created by simple means. Centuries of neglect have deposited a veil of patina on the walls. But through it can be seen even today the whole scale of colours: terra verde, red and yellow ocre, lamp black and lapis lazuli. The technique adopted in the preparation of surfaces was a base layer of clay mixed with rice husk and gum, upon which a coat of lime was applied to achieve smoothness.

In every picture there is a unity so enchanting that the viewer moving along the walls following the narrative of Jataka stories is transported to a new aesthetic plane.

MADANJEET SINGH



This publication is the first of the Unesco World Art Series devoted to the rare art masterpieces of the world.

Published by the New York Graphic Society by arrangement with Unesco, the series is designed to bring within the reach of artists, teachers, students and the wide art-loving public, the finest quality colour reproductions of masterpieces of art which hitherto have been known to a too limited few.

With the co-operation of the Governments and National Commissions of Unesco Member States, experts from the New York Graphic Society and Unesco have visited the various countries to assemble and have recorded by the most modern methods the material for these books.

The original photographs for the present volume, with the exception of the one reproduced on page 5, were taken by Madanjeet Singh. The reproductions, printing and binding were carried out by Amilcare Pizzi, Milan Italy.

The series has been designed and jointly edited by Peter Belfew and Anton Schutz.

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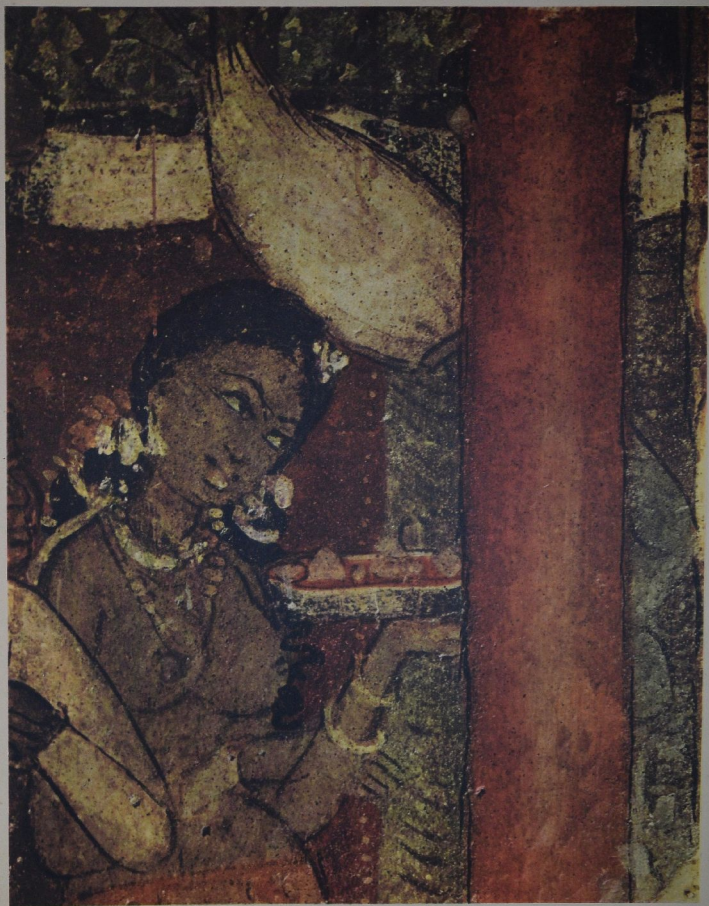




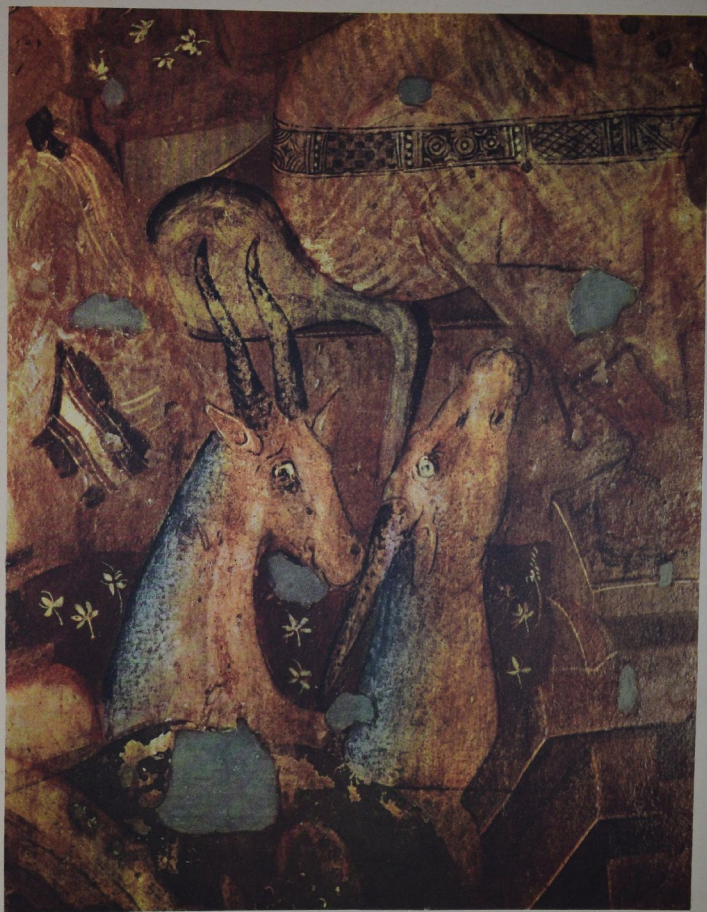


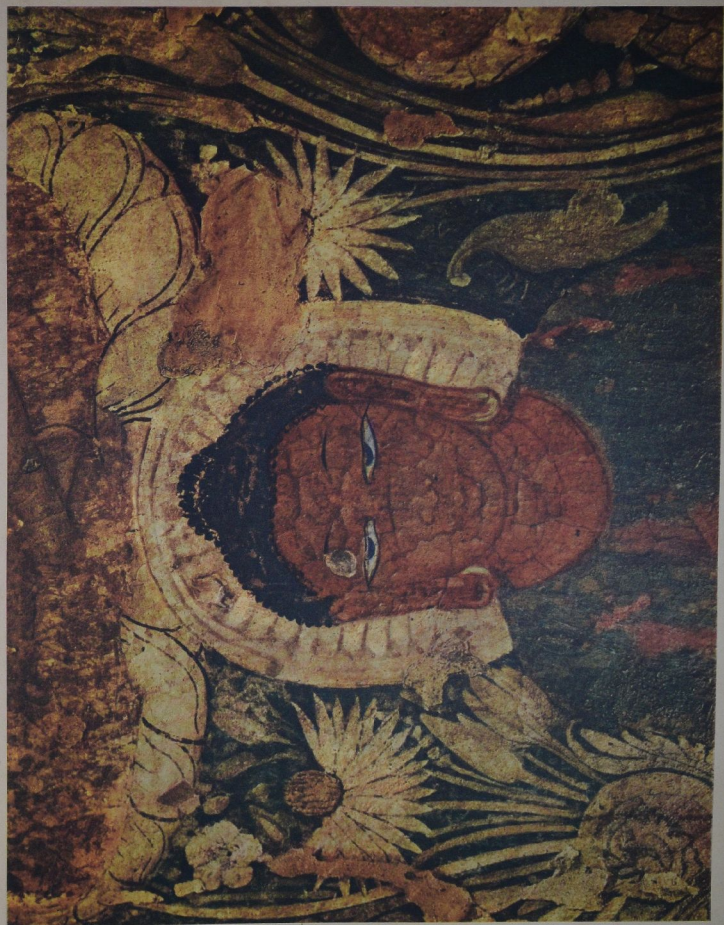


Pl. V - Three heads - detail from a royal procession (Cave 1)



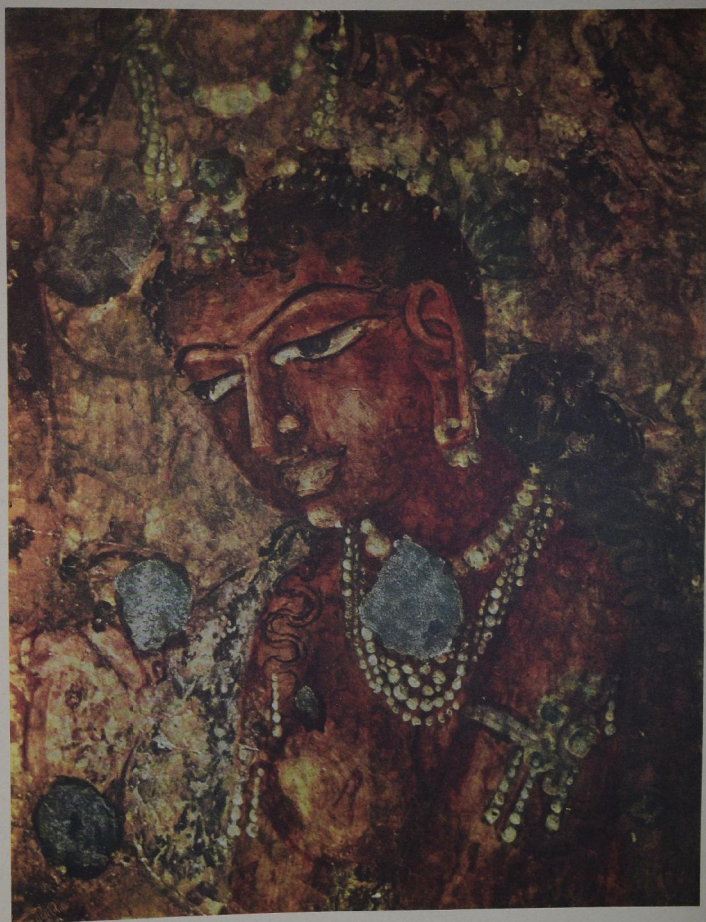
Pl. VI - A lady with a toilet tray (Case 1)

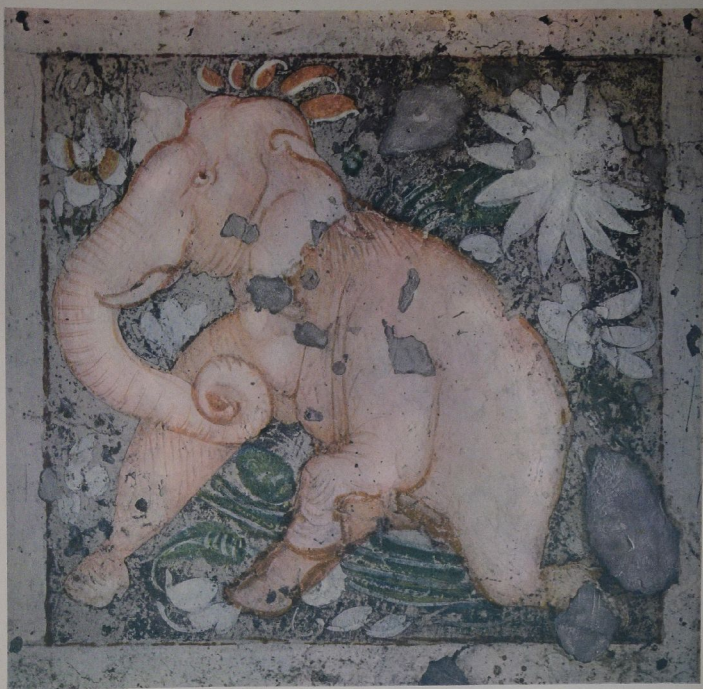














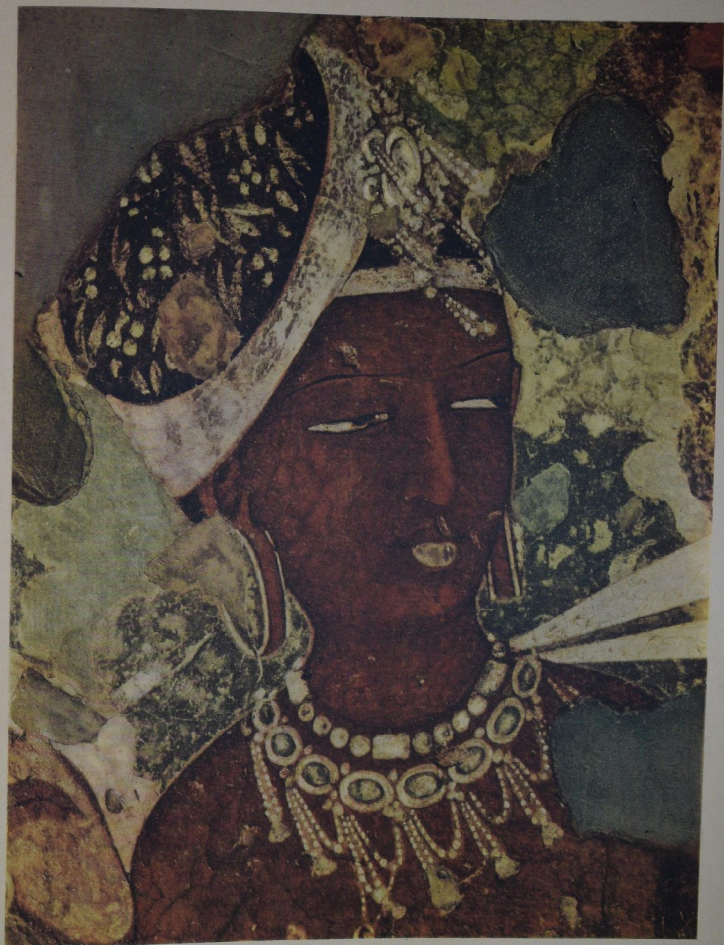


























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and introduction by Madanjeet Singh

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