Chapter four

Narrative styles and the special characteristics of the paintings

In relation to the art of painting, although the term ‘style’ is generally taken to denote the methods employed in the execution of the pictorial forms in line and colour, particularly the features of compositional arrangements and the visual effects of the paintings, Khandalavala interprets this somewhat differently. He concludes that a more satisfactory approach is to regard it as an integrated process conditioned by the skill of the artist, his mental attitude, his emotional response, his environment, his traditional and religious background and the interplay of political happenings, often momentous, against the canvas of history. But, it is clear that except for the first point, most of the other aspects of his statement unquestionably belong to the technical aspects and the sociological context of a painting. Hence, it has to be realized at this point that with the conceptualisation of an idea in the mind of the artist that ‘here these pictures should be drawn’ the sketching, outlining, applying paints, highlighting and every other process of painting proceeds by means of the brush and pigments. Eventually, the desired figures appear on the walls or on the canvas, whatever may be the ground of the paintings. The ultimate result of this long process of a painting, in the context of visual effects, particularly the manner, mode or method of presentation etc can be interpreted as its style. Therefore, in this chapter, the primary aim is to understand the style or the styles of

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the ancient Buddhist mural paintings of peninsular India and Sri Lanka, the method of their execution covering aspects of presentation, their forms or contour, application of colours, special characteristics like intrinsic lines, light and shade, modelling and perspectives etc, i.e. issues apparently dissimilar from Khandalavala's view. These are also different from the techniques, procedure or the means of the paintings, i.e. the way of preparation of the grounds and the methods employed for plastering them, materials as well as the pigments used, the instruments and the relevant canons of paintings etc which will be discussed separately in the next chapter in detail, in the context of technical aspects of the murals.

As mentioned in the introduction, it is interesting to note that most scholars who have worked on the subject of ancient paintings have given very little attention to a comparative study of the styles and narrative modes of the paintings of both countries though they have repeatedly stated that there is a close relationship between the two painting traditions. However, it has to be admitted at this juncture that except for the paintings of Ajanta and Tivamka image house, the bulk of narrative paintings that were at other ancient Buddhist shrines and temples have also not survived and on the basis of the present ruined state of such other painting sites where only the remnants survive any methodical analysis of the pictorial form is neither easy nor systematic. In addition, it is noteworthy that no authoritative texts or instructive canons describing the relationship between concept and form, stylistic analysis and their visual representation etc of the Buddhist tradition of mural paintings exist, either in India or Sri Lanka that could be helpful to understand the styles of these ancient paintings. Therefore, on superficial

appearance of pictorial representation alone the style or the styles of the Buddhist murals of the two countries has to be identified.

However, since most of the early scholars of both countries have noticed a close similarity between the paintings of Ajanta and Sri Lanka in relation to their styles particularly with those at Sigiriya or Hindagala which are the earliest datable paintings of the island and also as a majority of these critics have believed that the latter are the imitation of the former or that they were the modules for the tradition of ancient Sri Lanakan murals, it is appropriate to begin this analysis with the paintings of Ajanta where a number of paintings as well as a few stylistic variations also survive in order to understand the similarities and differences between the styles of paintings of the two countries. Besides these three major places, the styles of the rest of the mural sites of both India and Sri Lanka have also been discussed chronologically, since the main aim of the study is a comparative analysis of the paintings of the two countries.

**Compositional arrangements and the narrative styles of the paintings of India:**

As discussed in the previous chapter in detail, it is evident that the earliest paintings at Ajanta date back to the second century BC while the latest must have been executed over six or seven hundred years later. Basically, during this long span of time it can be reasonably expected that the murals underwent at least a few stylistic changes which are visible not only by comparing caves with caves but also panels with panels within the same caves. As an example of the latter, it is evident that cave no 10 has not
only the oldest paintings but probably the latest as well. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that in some instances, it is possible that rather than indicating that the paintings were done at different periods, the variety of styles may suggest individual hands of artists as discussed in the seventh chapter in detail. However, although the walls have been very ungenerous by way of giving any systematic response to researchers as many paintings have been damaged, some early scholars have tried to group these apparently similar compositions and attempted at labelling them as 'circular type of grouping,' 'connecting-link compositions' and the like while some others have attempted to demarcate two main styles, between cave nos 9, 10 and the paintings in other caves in a cursory manner. It is certainly evident that in the painted forms at Ajanta an observant eye can identify multiple stylistic figural types and varying compositional principles instead of one or two stylistic appearances. This is evident from the fact that Codrington has noticed four or at the most, five sequent styles apart from minor variations suggestive of individual artists.

In addition, though dealing directly with the narration of the story rather than with the styles of the paintings, it is noteworthy that Dehejia has recently described seven modes of narration in early Buddhist art, out of which six narrative modes have been used

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7 See Stella Kramrisch, A survey of painting in the Deccan, Archaeological Department, Hyderabad, 1937, pp.4-46 and 47-54.
by the painters of Ajanta during the fifth and sixth centuries AD.\textsuperscript{9} These seven modes are:

Monoscopic narrative: theme of action,\textsuperscript{10} Monoscopic narrative: Being in state versus being in action,\textsuperscript{11} A beginning in medias res,\textsuperscript{12} Sequential narrative,\textsuperscript{13} Synoptic narratives,\textsuperscript{14} Conflated narrative\textsuperscript{15} and Narrative network.\textsuperscript{16} According to Dehejia while artists of Ajanta thus made use of a variety of narrative modes to convey their stories, the network is their special contribution and their most favoured mode of discourse, with synoptic narrative second in popularity.\textsuperscript{17} Nevertheless, since Dehejia\textsuperscript{18} has totally neglected the earliest paintings of Ajanta, particularly those in cave nos 9 and 10, it is obvious that these identifications of narrative styles of the site are not applicable to all the paintings of Ajanta.\textsuperscript{18} In addition, according to the primary aim of the compilation, it would seem that this is only an application of narrative arrangements of the stone reliefs


\textsuperscript{10} This mode centres on a single event in a story, one that is generally neither the first nor the last and which introduces us to a theme of action. Such a scene is usually an easily identifiable even from a story and it serves a reference to the narrative. Ibid, p.10.

\textsuperscript{11} According to Dehejia artists to present the viewer with scenes from the Buddha’s life when the supremacy of the Buddha is the prime concern frequently use a static mode of monoscopic narration. In this mode artists generally present the single, culminating episode of a story and focus thematically on the wisdom and presence of the Buddha. Ibid, p.12.

\textsuperscript{12} A narrative that commence in medias res starts with an important event of a story rather than with the first event in time; such an event is generally followed by a return to an earlier period of time. Ibid, pp.18-19.

\textsuperscript{13} Like continuous narrative this contains the repeated appearance of the protagonist at different times and places; the distinction between the modes is compositional in nature and revolves around the principle of enframing. In continuous narrative temporal development is to be understood by mean of intrinsic criteria and requires an integrating effort of mind and eye on the part of the viewer. In sequential narrative the other hand, extrinsic criteria are used to demarcate temporal divisions. Ibid, p.20.

\textsuperscript{14} In this narration multiple episodes from a story are depicted with a single frame but their temporal sequence is not communicate and there is no consistent or formal order of representation with regard to either causality or temporality. The scant attention paid to the elements of time is characteristic of this mode. Ibid, p.21.

\textsuperscript{15} Complementary to the synoptic mode with which it shares many features. However, while multiple episodes of a story or multiple scenes of an episode are presented the figures of the protagonist is conflated instead of being repeated from one seen to next. Ibid, p.25.

\textsuperscript{16} A complex variety of story-telling, that may be described as a system of networks, in seen at its most expressive in the mural at the site of Ajanta. Ibid, p.27.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, p.236.
of the early sites of Bharhut, Sanchi etc synthetically imposed on the Ajanta paintings. Moreover, it is evident that the opinions thus expressed by Dehejia on the narrative styles of these early Buddhist reliefs of India have been critically examined by Huntington and have been rejected by giving another interpretation though later Dehejia has supplied a short rejoinder.

Besides, it is significant that Panikkar had described five types of such figural compositions that have been used by the painters of Ajanta obviously different from those described by both Dehejia and Huntington. Of these, the first type appears in the Hariti shrine of cave no 1. The right side of the shrine thus represents naturalistic, monumentality; voluminous, integrated line and colouring; and orderly, clarity of composition in the paintings of votaries. The second type: in the scenes of Vidurapandita Jataka of the right wall of cave no 2, represents naturalistic, orderly and well-integrated composition. The third type; all the paintings of cave nos 16 and 17, representing stylised naturalism with measured, and precise, elegance and orderly composition. The fourth type: Mahajanaka Jataka, Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara and Maitreya also in cave no 1, representing compositional complexity, accentuation formalised, line and shade separated and orderly unruffled composition. Finally, the fifth type: Mahajanaka Jataka, Sankhapala

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18 In addition, it is evident, as the author herself admitted, that her study of Ajanta’s narratives is mainly indebted to Dieter Schlingloff’s works on the identification of legends. Ibid, p.207.
Jataka and the story of Kalyanakarin again in cave no 1 representing further complexity, accentuation, arbitrary and vague.22

Thus, apart from the noticeable differences among the descriptions of these three writers, it is evident that as in the case of Dehejia’s categorisation, Panikkar has also classified these few stylistic variations based only on a few selected paintings. Therefore, the opinions of all these scholars on styles of paintings of Ajanta caves cannot be accepted as accurate or as an orthodox classification that covers the bulk of the paintings now available at the site. Though not harmonious with the two views in every respect, the most agreeable descriptions given by Fabri and Bhagwat on the compositions of the paintings of Ajanta show that at least three major varieties of arrangements of the stories are available at the site.23 Of these, the first type is visible in the second-first century BC paintings of the interior walls of cave nos 9 and 10 and are composed in a linear way; like in Bharhut or Sanchi reliefs. In this process, the picture is developed longitudinally, just like a carved cross-bar of a torana at Sanchi and the only division of this horizontal column, long ribbon, frieze like treatment24 is here and there a tree, a building or a group of rocks that vaguely define the end of one scene and the beginning of a second.25 These natural devices belong, indeed to both scenes. They go on, in a linear way and almost all

25 Shanti Swarup, 5000 years of arts and crafts in India and Pakistan, DB Taraporevala sons & co, Bombay, 1968, p.133.
the personages are on one level. It is noteworthy that these painted bands are not divided
by a line but by arranging either architectural construction of lintels or bricks or plants in
a horizontal disposition as in the case of the Mūrga Jataka and Simhlavadana paintings of
the later period of Ajanta. It is evident that a few such columns are arranged on the walls,
which are to be seen from left to right and again from right to left.

But unfortunately, due to their damaged state, the subject matter of most of these
early extant paintings in cave nos. 10 and 9 cannot be fully identified. The Chaddanta or
the story of the six-tusked elephant and the Sāma are the only two identified Jataka
stories painted in cave no 10. In addition, a royal personage accompanied by his retinue
of soldiers, dancers, musicians and women though greatly obliterated by modern
scribbling can be identified as the visit and worship of the Bodhi tree and the stupa as
discussed in the sixth chapter in detail. Of these, the story of the Chaddanta Jataka is
shown from right to left and again from left to right. It is conspicuous that the Jataka
story is not depicted in a strict chronological order, but the main incidents of the story can
easily be followed. It is apparent that geographical space rather than time governed the
organisation of the paintings as in the case of later paintings of Ajanta that will be
discussed later. However, this metaphysical element is very important at this stage since

the movements of the figures suggest a foreword thrust, not according to sequence but according to the convenience of the painter.\textsuperscript{31}

It is evident that in cave no 9 too the part of the frieze still left has two rows of superimposed human figures. From the stupa quadrangle, which they approach, a gate leads into another enclosure with trees and buildings, by the side of which once more human figures are superimposed. The quadrangle with the two lateral walls slanting in either direction, seems to empty its contents forward on its sloping ground, from back to front. A figure with a tray of offerings is shown at the gate on the way to the stupa.\textsuperscript{32} Another extant painting indicates two groups of figures separated from each other by rocks. Of these, the left group offers gifts to two nagas seated under a tree in the rocky shelter; the one having multiple cobra-hoods is most probably the naga king. The right group is much damaged and centres around a king who seems to be listening to the petitions of a group of five persons seated near his throne. A couple is standing to the left of the seated figures while a flying figure can still be seen above hovering towards the assembly.\textsuperscript{33}

When considering the special characteristics of these early paintings, it is evident that the limited colour scheme, the heavy proportions of the figures and unexaggerated naturalism are the conspicuous features. Of these, the colour scheme presents a contrast to that of the later painting, not to speak of the style and workmanship. Certainly, this


colour scheme is rather formal and limited to different hues, which became more distinguishable and vivid in the later ones with the addition of lapis lazuli, a brilliant blue colour.\textsuperscript{34} In addition, the ground in part is coloured in horizontal strips not meant to indicate the horizon. The division of the ground by two or three horizontal bands of colour is peculiar also to later paintings of cave no 17 for example, where the ground in the Chaddanta Jataka is streaked reddish, brown and greyish between the palace and elephants.\textsuperscript{35}

Besides, the human figures judged as pure painting, reveal a marked competence in simplified portraiture and it seems that many of the types that appear on the walls were indeed memory portraits. Certain aspects of the face are however evolved into norms such as the pouting lower lip, the almond shaped eye, the pencilled eyebrows. Many faces on the other hand, retain an individuality that leads to the conclusion that these early artists had already acquired skill in portrait painting and were accustomed when the occasion arose to produce reasonably good likenesses.\textsuperscript{36} Nevertheless, there is no recourse to highlighting the transgression of planes by shading or drawing marked body contours as seen in the paintings of the later period, where the figures show sculpturesque and forthcoming qualities, breaking the flatness of the surface by indicating scope for spontaneous and life like movements.\textsuperscript{37} In addition, it is particularly to be noted that in these early paintings, the Buddha had not been depicted in human form and instead he


had been painted symbolically by the Bodhi-tree or a stupa as discussed in the previous chapter. Thus, because of the absence of the Buddha in these early paintings, their direct connection with a religious purpose does not become apparent save to those who know the themes they depict. However, it is noteworthy that similar paintings cannot be found at any of the painting sites of Sri Lanka, not even among the oldest murals of the island.

Apart from these earliest paintings of cave nos. 9 and 10, in cave nos. 1, 2, 16 and 17 of Ajanta, remains of later period paintings can be found. The general assumption is that the style of these later paintings reached its zenith in cave nos. 16 and 17 where expression is driven to the highest pitch and the paintings of these two caves belong to one stylistic group. It is evident that the outlook and approach and even the technique of the painters of cave nos. 1 and 2 had considerably changed, but probably the style of these caves also evolved out of that of cave nos 16 and 17. However, it is conspicuous that these paintings are no longer composed in the broad frieze of the earlier style, but indeed cover the whole surface of the wall. Thus, except the panels painted on the ceilings and the frames painted around some of the doors and windows the major part of the wall paintings of later periods at Ajanta are without a frame. Vestiges of such an array occur in these murals and take the shape of plain separating lines or of rocks.

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houses and roof linked in horizontal continuity. 43 Thus, in cave nos. 1, 2, 16, 17 and others of the later period, the bands in which formerly the stories were laid out have broadened on the whole to the full width and length of the entire wall; as long as the wall continues, the paintings go on and one scene or story may extend not only on one wall, but also at a right angle to the painted field on the adjacent wall, or else as it is carried over on the face of a pilaster of cave no 17. 44

However, it is noteworthy that compositionally the body of these later period paintings at Ajanta falls at least into two distinct groups as already mentioned above. Of these, the first type is divided by an invisible diagonal line running across the composition of the painting. Nevertheless, this line does not hinder the rhythm of the arrangement as at places the curved lines of various forms help to continue the line of direction horizontally from one part to another. In fact, it is available at least on two whole walls, the most perfect examples of the superb achievement of this style in which the entire wall Fabri treated as one area of vision, one single, grandiose composition. These are the two “Botticellesque” masterpieces on the right hand side chapel of cave no 2; each wall a complete undisturbed, large composition, born of a single vision. The largest composition of all is the ‘Simahalavadana’ on the right wall of cave no 17, the boldest and most grandiose painting covering an enormous wall with one single

composition of unparalleled, powerful effect.\textsuperscript{45} There are, besides these three panels a few that belong almost to this group. Of these, the story of Nanda in cave no 16 is conspicuous. The transition towards mannerism is visible in the few paintings that may belong to the later period.

The second type shows a number of cubic blocks in the form of rows often of pavilions arranged horizontally. As a result, it appears that the composition of the paintings is broken up into compartments: the linear or the total composition of the first two groups gives place to a maze of little structures, pavilions, houses, verandas, tents, balconies and even rows of shops, all confining within their pillars and walls little groups of compositions, one or a few figures, separated from the rest by pillars, walls and the like.\textsuperscript{46} However, in these paintings the figures are arranged skilfully and provide a rhythmic line of movement that enters each pavilion reaches up to the central figures and comes out of it. It turns around the pillars and again enters the pavilion. This travel also gives a horizontal and wavy movement. However, the action of entering the box like pavilions and coming out again, gives a slight depth to this line of movement that enters the picture's surface and comes out again. It is noteworthy that though there are many pillars of the pavilions, they do not hinder this action; instead, it is played around them.\textsuperscript{47}

The \textit{Jatakas, Avadanas} or the life story of the Buddha thus depicted on the walls of these caves reveal a narrative sequence that runs sometimes from left to right, from right to left, from top to bottom or from bottom to top. In this narration, it is apparent that the chief character in any legend appears in the painting a number of times engaged in

successive phases of the action of the story. For example in the legend of the Chaddanta Jataka in cave no 17, the chief character of the six-tusked elephant is painted twice with his wives in the lotus pond and again bowing down to the hunter to let him kill him. Similarly, the hunter is also represented several times. In fact, this is one of the popular traditional methods in which the element of time is introduced into the spatial, intrinsically static universe of pictorial art.\textsuperscript{48} However, though the figures are placed one behind the other, they do not create a strong feeling of space. But, the movement created by the illustration of the forthcoming effect becomes interesting. This feeling of the form emerging towards the surface keeps the rhythmic web woven by the lyrical arrangement.\textsuperscript{49}

It is noteworthy that in this process, the central figure has always been drawn on a monumental scale, defying the real size of the character.\textsuperscript{50} The subsidiary characters often act as links, with their poses, facial expressions and gestures repeated in two different scenes.\textsuperscript{51} It is interesting to note that in most cases there are no strict demarcations separating one instance in a story from another.\textsuperscript{52} But, in some instances, as in the case of the earliest paintings, in these later paintings too the artist introduced new modes in delineating successive events and in partitioning them with architectural, vegetation or other novel motifs like rocks. Thus, by an appropriate dispersal of the

scenes on the walls, he could resolve the difficult proposition of showing the distance in
time and space between two events.\textsuperscript{53} For instance, in cave no 17, not a division, but an
articulation along horizontal lines is effected in the large painting of the Vessantara
Jataka by rocks set in horizontal sequence.\textsuperscript{54} Nevertheless, since various scenes were not
separated by the frames, at first sight, the different scenes seem to merge into each other
and the spectator can only gradually pick out the events that separate the different groups.
Thus, when displaying the events of a story although one scene merges with another,
both horizontally and vertically, there is however, no feeling of confusion, but a steady
continuous movement, which is only halted when the arrested eye imposes its frame.\textsuperscript{55}

In contrast, this continuous narrative laid out in a band to be read from left to right
or vice versa, along the length of a wall as already noted, had evolved into a kind of
continuous web extending vertically as well as horizontally over large areas of the
surface. Within this web, the whole action of a story can be identified as if it were in
progress simultaneously all over the wall.\textsuperscript{56} Accordingly, it is apparent that space in
Indian Buddhist mural painting tradition of this period is not the conventional box or
cube in which the data of visual experience is fitted. Consequently, space is continuous
and is not divided artificially into foreground, middle-distance, background or up and
down and sides. Also space is not further divided into the space in which a work of art
exists and space in which the spectator moves.\textsuperscript{57} Due to all these reasons the composition

\textsuperscript{53} MN Deshpande, “The murals: Their theme and content,” Ajanta murals: An album of eighty-five
\textsuperscript{54} Stella Kramrisch, A survey of painting in the Deccan, Archaeological Department, Hyderabad, 1937,
p.48.
\textsuperscript{55} Douglas Barrett and Basil Gray, Treasures of Asia: Painting of India, ed. Albert Skira, The World
Publishing co, Ohio, 1963, p.27.
\textsuperscript{57} Dinkar Kowshik, Age and image: A short survey of Indian art, Allied Publishers, New Delhi, 1963, p.29.
of this later period murals at Ajanta seems at first sight complicated and overcrowded. Though this is sometimes the case, the mere fact of employing a large number of figures in a scene does not destroy its compositional effectiveness. For instance, an observation of the famous *Simhalavadana* painting of cave no 17, shows how admirably the artist has arranged his pictorial narrative, keeping his great subject-the battle-with which to make a strong centre for his composition.\(^{58}\)

In this visual process when one grows accustomed to looking at them, miraculously the different groups of figures become distinct from one another, a pattern emerges, a harmony is revealed.\(^{59}\)

On the other hand, it has to be remembered that as to the crowded nature of the paintings, Buddhist legend is also always crowded and much had to be shown in most limited space as in the case of the *Simhalavadana* story mentioned above. However, in contrast, it is evident that at Ajanta the grouping of figures and general management of large scenes speak to a highly developed sense of composition and leave little room for criticism on the score of confusion.\(^{60}\)

But, in most cases, some incidents of the stories are found in seemingly unrelated places in the overall compositions. It is thus evident that the emphasis is upon elements or parts of the story rather than the sequential narrative. Consequently, in these murals past, present and future also can coexist simultaneously.\(^{61}\)

Thus it is significant that the painted stories of Ajanta are not depicted in a strict chronological order though the main incidents of the legend can easily be followed. For instance, in the story of Chaddanta Jataka in

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cave no 17 the incidents are not painted in a chronological order or the painter has apparently changed its order. As a result, he begins with the wild life of elephants in an impenetrable forest with marshy soil infested by crocodiles and pythons and terminates with palaces, crowded with human figures and a royal procession to a place of worship comprising a stupa and a temple. In the middle he has delineated the bath of the royal elephant in the lotus lake and his favourite resort under a colossal banyan tree etc were depicted evidently not following the chronological order, as narrated in the original Jataka story. Likewise, in the Sutasoma Jataka painting, also in the same cave, the different episodes in the complex composition are not depicted in a proper sequence. The story starts from the bottom right corner between the first and the second cell-doors where the figure of king Sudasa emerges on horseback from the city gate though the Jataka story gives more detail at the beginning, which has been depicted afterwards by the painters.

Thus, it was common practice with all the artists of Ajanta to group the episodes of a story according to the place of their occurrence and not according to their sequence. Consequently, it is evident that as in the case of the earliest paintings of Ajanta, in the later paintings at the site too, geographical space rather than time governed the organisation of the paintings. For instance, in the Sutasoma Jataka mentioned above, the left side is used for the city of Hastinapura, the right side for the town of Varanasi and the central portion of the painting for the forest that was the setting for the prelude to the

story. Similarly, the story of Simhalavadana in the same cave utilised the right side as the ‘witches island,’ the left third as the king’s palace and the central space as belonging to the merchant protagonist Simhala. Likewise, the Vessantara Jataka of the same cave used its central area for the forest environment of banishment of the prince and the left and right extremes for the king’s palace. Besides these Jatakas and Avadanas, when portraying the special events of the life story of the Buddha also this methodology of displaying the geographical space has evidently been used.\(^\text{65}\)

However, besides these three major stylistic variations at the site, with the decline of artistic stand and in the last stage of Ajanta, the usual narrative modes were replaced by repetitive representation of Buddha figures in various attitudes particularly under the concept of thousand Buddhas or the miracle of Sravasti as discussed in the sixth chapter in detail. It is obvious that although these were painted according to formula, each face called for separate attention, each attitude-evoked admiration, and each gesture had a different fascination. Nevertheless, the form of stylisation thus set in during the last days of Ajanta was unquestionably dull and repetitive. The monotonous rows of Buddhas were the herald of an art lacking in liveliness and spontaneity. Coarser outlines, forms without elegance, colouring that lacked imagination and somewhat heavy-handed brush strokes are all to be noticed.\(^\text{66}\) Certainly, this repetition of the same theme of the Buddha figure began to lead to somewhat mechanical production and this in its turn led to a decline in standards of drawing and colouring.

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Accordingly, it is clear that there are at least four stylistic variations available among the wall paintings of the caves of Ajanta. No doubt that in all these cases the availability of such extensive space is the main factor that has a considerable influence on the composition of paintings since it provides the possibility to compose the forms in a variety of ways, both vertically and horizontally. Hence, it is not unreasonable to think that the artist might as well have painted wilfully, each time anew from the force of his inspiration.67 Besides these murals on the walls although no tail is presented on the ceilings most of the canopy paintings show how forcefully the artist has been able to draw animals spaced in flowers and plants in between, as if to suggest a world of make belief and ignore the apparent proportional improbabilities.68 Cave no 2 is remarkable for such ceiling paintings (Plate IX). Like cave no 1 and the others of the later period, these paintings on the ceiling take the form of compartments filled in with a variety of endless designs, including plants, floral patterns, flowers, birds, fruits, flying figures, geometric and ornamental motifs etc.69

Thus, it is evident that unlike the murals, the paintings on the ceiling are essentially decorative in character, permeated with stylised naturalness, freshness and grace and bearing the stamp of an unerring command over form. Besides these kinds of designs, it is noteworthy that in cave no. 1, a composition, which with slight variation is repeated no less than four times, shows a bearded personage dressed in a peaked cap, mantle and boots, attended by musicians.70 In addition, the ceiling of the veranda of cave

68 Ibid, p.47.
no 17 is also painted with various designs in compartments and the central panel of the canopy has a group of six figures, their hands arranged in such a way that though only one hand of each figure is represented, it gives the appearance of having two hands. 71

In contrast, significant differences exist between these ceiling paintings and the wall paintings of Ajanta particularly in format and colouration. Unlike the walls, the central spaces of these ceilings that have survived are painted in grid-like patterns containing floral and abstract motifs as well as some animal and human scenes as discussed above, instead of following continuous narration. In addition, round mandalic patterns with concentric bands of foliated and floriated patterns 72 can be seen above the important images, in antechambers and at certain other specified locations (Plate IX). As regards their colouration, white is abundantly used in these ceilings, although not on the walls, and this may have been to help reflect light in the dim interiors. Thus, compared to the predominance of earth tones used on the wall paintings, the ceilings are more brightly coloured. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the animal and plant forms depicted on the ceilings are frequently painted in a flat manner with little modelling or shading and the forms thus appear almost as silhouettes against the background unlike the paintings on the walls.

In terms of the styles of Buddhist mural paintings of India, the Bagh caves are taken by competent authorities to be contemporaneous with the later paintings of Ajanta and belong to the fifth or sixth centuries AD. Unfortunately the paintings at Bagh, unlike those at Ajanta are in too poor a state of preservation to comment upon with certainty of their styles. Originally covering the entire back wall of the loggia, only three portions above and immediately to the west of the main portal are now recognisable and even these fragments are in a sadly deteriorated state through the action of the elements and more particularly through the vandalous scribbling. In the first stage of the painting process at the site, the background and the elements of the theme were marked on the dry plaster and the background painted first as in the case of Ajanta. In the second stage, light colours were used for the figures and in the third stage outlines were made in the dark colour in order to highlight the figures. Finally the designs on the dress, ornaments and other decorative elements were painted.

Thus, in so far as one can tell from their present condition, the style of cave no 4 i.e. Rang Mahal cave at Bagh is identical with the works at Ajanta (Plate X). The figure of Padmapani deserves mention here. The face is still surviving and some parts of the body, which is decorated with garlands and flowers, can also be seen. In addition, represented at Bagh are an elephant procession and what appears to be a dancing scene with beautifully rhythmic figures of young girls moving in a circle around a

personage\textsuperscript{76} identical to the Ajanta murals. In these murals somewhat sombre colour effects are heightened by a brilliant lapis blue. This stylistic device in colouring is obviously common to both the sites of Ajanta and Bagh.\textsuperscript{77} Nevertheless, it is to be noted that unlike at Ajanta, stylistically a painted thick band separates each and every scene of Bagh paintings, though they are simple and without decoration.\textsuperscript{78}

Besides these, it is significant that as in the case of Ajanta, at Bagh also there were painted ceilings though again little remains (Plate XI). The ceiling drawings mostly consisted of squares inset with birds, animals and bunches of leaves and fruits and in some cases of concentric circles.\textsuperscript{79} Unlike at Ajanta, one panel of a mother hen with chickens, though the colour has disappeared, is particularly delightful and indicates the essentially human approach, which the painters brought to their task when the occasion afforded the opportunity to deviate from planned themes.\textsuperscript{80}

**Styles and the compositional arrangements of the paintings of Sri Lanka:**

It was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that except for the paintings of the Tivamka image house of Sri Lanka, the narrative paintings from other ancient Buddhist sites of the island are not available which would have been comparable to the style of the paintings of Ajanta and Bagh in India. Consequently, any stylistic analysis of the pictorial forms of these remains of other Sri Lankan painting sites is not an easy task unlike the case of Ajanta. It was mentioned in the first chapter that it is a common


\textsuperscript{77} Karl Khandalavala, *The development of style in Indian painting*, Macmillan, Madras, 1974, p.44.


assumption not only among early scholars but also among modern writers that the Sigiriya and Hindagala murals, the earliest datable paintings of Sri Lanka are closely related to those at Ajanta since they were contemporary and display some superficial similarities. In addition, some scholars also believe that artists trained in the same school possibly the very same hands executed both the Indian and Sri Lankan paintings as also mentioned in the first chapter in detail. Therefore, it needs to be explained at the beginning as to how this assumption emerged among these scholars.

It is evident that by the time the Sigiriya paintings received scholarly attention in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a great deal had already been written about the murals of Ajanta. In fact, these were regarded as the highest achievement of the painters of classical India and they were also the oldest surviving paintings of the historical period of the subcontinent. No paintings comparable to them were known from any ancient site in any other region of South Asia. Therefore, it is not surprising, that the Ajanta paintings came to be regarded as models in the pictorial traditions of Asia. This paradigmatic role assigned to them had the tendency to devalue all later discoveries, in India and elsewhere, as it became commonplace to regard these others as derivation of Ajanta painting. Thus, it is clear that these views were originally expressed at a time when very little was known of the extent and character of early Sri Lankan paintings. The situation was indeed the same even at the beginning when the Ajanta paintings were compared with other painting traditions of the Chinese, early Renaissance and so on, according to the individual training and inclination of the scholar, either to establish their

80 Karl Khandalavala, The development of style in Indian painting, Macmillan, Madras, 1974, p.44.
superiority or indicate their deficiency. For instance, it was mentioned in the first chapter that based on the wrong identification of the scene of the so-called 'Persian Embassy' some scholars observed that it suggests the possibility that the pictorial art of Ajanta may have been derived from Persia and ultimately from Greece, though it is now accepted that the paintings of Ajanta evolved and were nurtured on indigenous soil.

Thus, in this context, when speaking of the connection between Ajanta and Sigiriya, as discussed in the previous chapter, it is particularly to be noted that one is hard pressed to find any line of interaction, direct or indirect between the two sites. Certainly, there is no historical evidence of any political or cultural exchange between the Vakataka rulers and Sri Lankan kings when Ajanta was an active centre of Buddhism during the fifth-sixth centuries AD or even during an earlier phase of the site. No clear information on the movements of pilgrims and Buddhist clergy of the two regions is available which would be helpful to establish this belief. In addition, it is to be noted that the painters of Ajanta had been at work for over six or seven hundred years or sometimes even more, beginning about the second century BC. As already noted, they are known for a variety of styles, displaying differences in attitude and expertise. Nevertheless, one company of artists completed the Sigiriya murals within a few short years, possibly investing them with an unmistakable homogeneity, permitting us to speak of a style. Therefore, it is obvious that to speak of Ajanta paintings as though they have all been done in one single

style is not appropriate unlike Sigiriya murals painted on the main rock. In addition, there being no obvious narrative functions at Sigiriya, the most important factor in relation to their style is each figure or group of two, which remains isolated as idealized portraits unlike the murals of Ajanta (Plates I, XII and XIII). There is also no conspicuous dramatic posturing or action of the busts of Sigiriya at all though these are not altogether lacking in a sense of variety.85

On the other hand, it is evident that these female figures of Sigiriya are all depicted with realism rare in Indian art 86 and the figures have a rich healthy flavour -a contrast- that almost makes the masterpieces of Indian art seem sallow. Besides, the most distinctive characteristics of this style concern the fundamentals of drawing and the application of colours, which will be discussed later. However, it may be noted here that the limitation of colours and the total absence of blue in the paintings of Sigiriya are the major important differences in the style.87 In addition, just as the drawing is more vigorous than that of the artists of India, so colours are bolder and direct and the tonalities more intense than those employed in the paintings of Ajanta.88 It is however evident that the work attitude of the painter at Sigiriya seems to have been softness, rather than a laboured and precise execution. This is apparent in the line work of the body and the facial details and in the single layered pigmentation executed in one sweep of the brush on the surface (Plate XII). This technique has provided volume to the figures by the

87 VA Smith, A history of fine arts in India and Ceylon, DB Taraporevala and sons, Bombay, (reprinted) 1969, p.100.
88 Benjamin Rowland, The wall paintings of India Central Asia and Ceylon, Boston, 1938, p.84.
application of a single brush stroke along the outline, unlike at Ajanta where tonal gradation is used for this purpose. It is noteworthy that besides these paintings executed on the main rock the fragment of decoration from the cobra-hood cave in Sigiriya is also in exactly the same bold style as the paintings of the *apsaras* of the main rock thus discussed above; the same freedom, almost coarseness, of drawing, the same brilliance of colour within the identical palette can be recognised immediately. Although it is believed that here is also a painter’s adaptation of the theme by comparison over delicate patterns that ornament the halls of Ajanta and Bagh it is obvious from the above statement itself that the ceiling paintings at Sigiriya are completely different from those of Indian ceiling ornamentation.

Thus, in contrast, it is obvious that far from it being so the Sigiriya paintings may be described as a derivation of the Ajanta school of painting. Although some of the stylistic features only in relation to the superficial appearances of the paintings at Sigiriya in minute level suggest a common element with some of those of Ajanta and Bagh. It is certain that such similarities could be noted among any artistic traditions particularly in an Asian or Buddhist religious context. This is evident from the fact that a similarity between the early Chinese and Indian painting tradition had been suggested by early scholars as already noted. How far this condition is prevalent is evident from the fact that one can compare even two completely distinct artistic traditions as Upadhyaya did. He saw a comparison between the Buddhist mural paintings of Ajanta and a few centuries

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later Sopocani Christian art of Yugoslavia.\textsuperscript{91} As mentioned in the first chapter, the similarities between Jhalai prehistoric paintings and the later murals of Ajanta caves, which have been noticed by Gordon\textsuperscript{92} in 1950s is another such glaring example.

Besides Sigiriya, when we speak of the styles of the other Buddhist mural paintings of Sri Lanka, it is conspicuous that in the fragmentary painting at Hindagala, a certain similarity of linear drawing to Sigiriya prevails specially in the Buddha and other larger figures. It is apparent that these figures have been drawn with more skill and the themes being light, the lines do not convey so much expression but they suggest exuberance.\textsuperscript{93} However, as in the case of Ajanta and unlike the murals of Sigiriya the figures of Hindagala painting also have been over crowded. The skill of draughtsmanship varies between good and mediocre creating a certain disharmony at times. In general, the individual figures are good; that of the Buddha being the best-restricted expression. In contrast, though not the most sophisticated technically; the Hindagala mural has shown itself capable of expressing emotions by suggesting psychological relationship between the protagonists of the story as in the case of Ajanta.\textsuperscript{94} Thus, it is observable that the fragment of painting represents the work of a school having some aspects in common with the later phase of the paintings of Ajanta. This is particularly evident from the figures of Buddhas surrounded by gods in postures of adoration. Here, as at Ajanta, but


\textsuperscript{92} DH Gordon, \textit{The prehistoric background of Indian culture}, Bhulabhai Memorial Institute, Bombay, 1958, p.108.

\textsuperscript{93} Nandadeva Wijesekera, \textit{Early Sinhalese painting}, Saman Press, Maharagama, 1959, p.85.

unlike the Sigiriya murals one scene merges into the other, the principal characters being repeated in each due to their method of presentation of the story. The main character is thus repeated in every scene to show continuity and connection with the previous scene. Accordingly, it is clear that continuous narration remains the dominant feature of both forms of painting.

Besides Hindagala as mentioned in the previous chapter, unlike in India, numerous traces of early paintings in association with some of the ancient stupas have been detected at Anuradhapura of which the best preserved are those on the walls of the frontispiece on the eastern side of the Ruvanvalisaya. Unlike the painting remnants found at other stupas of Anuradhapura, particularly the style of the painting or the decorative patterns of the murals on these frontispiece of Ruvanvalisaya is somewhat similar to that of the later Ajanta ceiling paintings (Plate XIV), being characterised as they are by bold free hand execution of curves, with a truthful and at the same time decorative treatment of plant motif. Among these, the introduction of animal forms, human dwarfs and other living beings is interesting. However, in these designs at Anuradhapura no restricted movement of the units prevails. Instead, there is considerable variety and free play of the elements. The display of leaves and flowers set amidst kinnaras and animals shows imagination and novelty. Pigments are also merely applied for colour effects.

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96 Nandadeva Wijesekera, Early Sinhalese painting, Saman Press, Maharagama, 1959, p.79.
97 Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that at Ajanta, on the outer surface of the small stupas at caitya halls of cave nos 9 and 10 contain some traces of paintings.
Besides these few sites, where only the fragments of paintings are available it was mentioned above that one of the most important site in the Sri Lankan context is the Tivamka shrine. Although the time gap between the two is wide and architecturally the two are different yet, the general arrangement of the paintings of this image house is considerably similar to that at Ajanta. As a result, prominence has been given to the Jataka scenes and the life story of the Buddha painted at the entrance of the shrine. The main aim of these was the inducement of the proper frame of mind by an appeal to the emotional sentiment of the devotee. The tedium is broken by floral decoration interspersed on the walls and pillars at intervals. Then comes the procession of gods and men all of whom pay homage to the Buddha. Next, there are the incidents such as the descent at Sankissa and the invitation of gods of Tusita heaven to the Bodhisattva connected with the life story of the Buddha.\(^\text{100}\)

In this context, it is to be noted that as was mentioned in the previous chapter, there are two layers of paintings on the walls of Tivamka image house, which belong to two distinct periods. As in the case of Ajanta, the Tivamka image house also displays a mixture of styles. Of these, a different idiom can be detected in the murals at the entrance hall of the image house. The painters have adopted what can be regarded as a popular tradition considerably different from the classical style of other painting sites of the island (Plate XV). In this tradition the whole wall surface was divided into a few horizontal strips or columns by clear lines unlike Ajanta and Bagh within which a story was depicted in the method of continuous narration. At times, the composition was drawn horizontally in three parallel running panels or occasionally vertically taking the whole space but never

\(^{100}\) Ibid, p.102.
allowing blankness to creep in. In this style, the stories have been depicted in a narrative style, starting from left to right and in these Jataka scenes or the life stories of the Buddha, the narrative effects emerge clearly as in the case of Ajanta and Hindagala murals. In addition, there is no break among the episodes too. Consequently, one incident merges into the other. Thus, it is evident that in these paintings, a number of episodes are combined in one panel: hence the principle character appears repeatedly or more than once as in the case of the narration of the murals of Ajanta. Consequently, unlike the single figures or pairs at Sigiriya, these paintings gave the artist the opportunity to show his skill in composition and in the drawing of the human figure in various attitudes. 101

Besides, it is noteworthy that these figures of the paintings are mainly arranged according to the importance of the characters and the central position was allocated to the most important figure as in the case of Ajanta murals. Proportion also depended on the importance of the person of the story and it is most conspicuous in scenes showing the Buddha or Bodhisattva. For instance, at the Tivamka sanctum, various scenes from the Jataka stories with the central figures of the Bodhisattva have been drawn larger than the rest of the figures. Here, exaggeration of the limbs through colour or size was another conspicuous feature. 102 Other important elements and dramatic stages of the story were subsequently stressed. In fact, this is noticeable at Ajanta, Bagh and Hindagala as much as at Tivamka shrine at Polonnaruva. 103

Nevertheless, it is to be noted that these outer murals are much sketchier or painted more loosely and with less care and control. The treatment of the human figure is also

103 Ibid, p.100.
much looser. It demonstrates dissolution of form, which we might speculate, clears the way for the emergence of the stylised mode.\footnote{Senaka Bandaranayaka, \textit{The rock and wall paintings of Sri Lanka}, Lake House, Colombo, 1986, p.85.} Accordingly, this later style or the popular tradition of the paintings of Tivamka image house show considerable stylistic deterioration in quality when compared with the masterpieces of more spacious early paintings of the shrine, as in the case of the latest paintings of Ajanta. In addition, though the painter was capable of expressive and delicate line work, could give plasticity to his figures, and understood the principles of balanced composition, but the figures have become stiff and the draughtsmanship has become undetermined and uninteresting.\footnote{Benjamin Rowland, \textit{The wall paintings of India Central Asia and Ceylon: A comparative study}, Alfa Publications, Delhi, Vol. I, 1937, (reprinted) 1985, p.85.}

However, in the inner sanctuary, the figure of the Buddha and deities in large size are painted in the classical style\footnote{S Paranavitana, "Sinhalese art and architecture," \textit{Souvenir catalogue of the international exhibition of paintings}, February 1952 at the Art Gallery, Colombo, 1952, p. 20.} (Plate II) almost parallel to the ‘aesthetic qualities’ of Ajanta and Bagh. In this composition, although the painting contained many scenes it was grouped together to form one whole. Consequently, unlike the murals of Jataka stories or the life story of the Buddha of the entrance hall, there is no need to move on to follow the development of the story. Instead, only the eyes of the spectator had to rove around. For example, in the instance of the scene of the invitation of the gods, the drawing occupies the whole length of the painted area of the wall. The scene in which the gods entreat the Bodhisattva to attain Buddhahood has tiers of gods rising one over the other but these are not in separate bands of painting as in the case of the paintings at Ajanta and the paintings of popular tradition in the entrance hall of the Tivamka shrine. Moreover, as in the case of Ajanta, these paintings in the inner chamber of the temple too have been done in a highly...
elegant, elaborate and courtly manner. They are carefully painted, with firm linear control, a clear statement of plastic quality and tonal modelling as in the representations of the gods or a fine network of painted detail combined with poise or a grand conceptual sweep and compositional plan as in the scene of descent from the Tusita heaven. The narrative action or iconic grouping is also usually centralised, i.e. organised around a central figure as in the case of Ajanta paintings. Noteworthy among these paintings is a group of celestial beings, forming a portion of a large scene. Among these is a figure of noble mien, about half life-size, standing in the *tribhanga* posture and holding a flower in one hand. Particularly, the pose and the facial expression of this figure reminds one of the well-known Padmapani Bodhisattva in cave no. 1 at Ajanta.108

In contrast, it is evident that in both these styles of paintings at the Tivamka shrine, the complete wall is occupied as at Ajanta and Bagh. No doubt that the availability of such extensive space is a main factor that has considerable influence on the composition. It provides the possibility to compose the forms in a variety of ways, both vertically and horizontally. In fact, the style mastered the art of mass composition. A large picture was composed of a number of lesser pictures in a kind of montage of movement showing the development of the story. The task of controlling the complex composition and animated movement was done without effort, making the most important incident in a story take the most prominent place and other secondary incidents arranged round it in a manner that


gave the vast composition balance and rhythm. In this process, it is apparent that the figures were not always expected to be composed within a set framework or a known border unlike in the case of ceiling paintings, column ornamentation and the figures of thousand Buddhas at Ajanta. Instead, limits were determined by the figures themselves and these according to their movement determined the limits.

Thus, when comparing the mural paintings of the Tivamka image house at Polonnaruva with those of Ajanta a considerable similarity in respect of their styles is noticeable. Certainly, it is evident that the ordinary subjects, common animals and natural life of the Tivamka murals have also been shown in a way similar to that at Ajanta. Nevertheless, it is obvious that at Ajanta the subjects are of multifarious nature and preserve a larger element of the popular social life as evident from the material culture itself than at Tivamka shrine as discussed in the sixth and seventh chapters in detail. Hence, it would be erroneous to conclude that the classical tradition of Indian painting, represented at Ajanta and Bagh was kept alive in Sri Lanka after it had lost its vitality in India itself, as Archer and Paranavitana suggested. No doubt that except for the figural compositions, most of the other elements of the murals at these two sites clearly indicates their individuality even from their superficial appearance itself.

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111 See also Ibid, p.100.
Painted labels:

Besides these compositional arrangements, when speaking of the styles of the paintings of India and Sri Lanka, the painted inscriptions or the labels on the murals\textsuperscript{113} of Ajanta and Bagh are also important since this feature is abandoned in the ancient Buddhist mural paintings of Sri Lanka. But it is significant that this characteristic has not received the attention of former scholars who have studied the ancient painting traditions of the two countries. Hence, this feature has also to be discussed in detail to understand the stylistic dissimilarities between the two painting traditions. At Ajanta, such painted inscriptions are now found only in cave nos. 2, 6, 9, 10, 11, 16, 17 and 22.\textsuperscript{114} But, since the paintings of Ajanta are heavily damaged, we may assume that several painted labels have disappeared and an occasional record that survives probably testifies to a practice that was more widespread than it appears today.

However, cave no. 2 contains a good number of such painted records though they are fragmentary in nature. A majority of them were found on the walls of the porch to the left of the veranda and quote verses in Sanskrit from the Kshāntivadi Jātaka found in the Jātaka-māla.\textsuperscript{115} In addition, a fragmentary portion of a verse from the concluding

\textsuperscript{113} In fact, strictly speaking these should be called painted records or labels and not the inscriptions, as the characters in these are not incised.


segments of Aryasura's Maitribala Jataka also survives here. Thus it is clear that all these verses are barely visible today and the paintings too have decayed so badly that only a few segments remain. Besides, a fragmentary painted record on the back wall of the antechamber to the right of the shrine door of the same cave records the donation as that of 'Budhasahasa' or the 'Thousand Buddhas'.

Similarly, cave no. 6 also contains a painted record on the left wall of the upper storey and it records the gift by a monk whose name has been read as Taranakirttana. In addition, in cave no 9 twelve inscriptions have been noticed and all are votive inscriptions, eight of which are fragmentary in nature. It is significant that cave no 10 contains the largest number of painted records and twenty-one such votive inscriptions have been noticed including the four, which cannot be traced at present. In cave no 11 although there are a few remains of paintings at least two such painted records are known. In addition, in cave no 16, there are altogether three donatory inscriptions and in cave no 17 there are no votive inscriptions, but there are a few labels illustrating the figure of Yaksha 'Manibhadra' and scenes from the Sibi Jataka. Besides, in cave no 22,

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below the Buddhas are labels, giving their names as Vipasvi, Sikhi, Visvabhu, Krakuchandah, Kanakamunih, Kasyapah, Sakyamunih and Maitreyah. Above the trees that shelter each Buddha figure are further painted labels identifying the species and the four surviving labels read as Pundarika, Sirisah, Udumbarah and Nyagrodhah. On the same wall, near its junction with the back wall can be seen another painted record below the painted figures of the nagas holding the stalk of the lotus on which is seated a carved figure of Buddha.

Accordingly, it is clear that apart from the written Sanskrit verses painted beside certain narrative murals of some of the caves, the painted inscriptions of Ajanta are mainly of two kinds: describing individual painted figures like “Maitribala raja” (in cave no 2), “Sibi raja” (in cave no 17) or “Indrah” (in cave no 16); and secondly those describing the whole story like “Visvantarah” (in cave no 16) or “Kshantivadi” (in cave no 2). Without doubt, all these are intrusive into the visual field and this is particularly evident from the fact that the word ‘Sibiraja’ is painted four times beside the figure of that monarch in the Sibi Jataka painting represented in cave no 17.

Although this feature is abandoned in the ancient Buddhist mural paintings of Sri Lanka, it is noteworthy that in Bagh caves\textsuperscript{128} too there are at least remnants of an inscription that appears to have consisted of two lines of writing in Sanskrit characters. Of these, only one letter is plainly visible, it is a looped ‘ka’ apparently the concluding letter of the first line. In front of it, there are traces of another letter which can no longer be identified, but seems to be provided with the vowel mark ‘e.’ However, as in the case of Ajanta, possibly this inscription also refers to the subject of the adjoining fifth scene which portrays a cavalcade of at least seventeen horsemen moving towards the left in five or six rows.\textsuperscript{129}

When attention is focused on the utility of these painted records found both at Ajanta and Bagh, a statement made by Amita Ray on the Buddhist reliefs of Andhradesh is also relevant to this study. She has concluded that “most of the stories and legends at Bharhut and Bodhagaya were given an inscription for identification, a practice which was discontinued even at Sanchi, nothing to speak of Amaravati and later monuments, it is perhaps a proof of the fact that already by the time when reliefs on the gates of the great stupa of Sanchi came to be carved, the stories and legends had become relatively more known to the people.”\textsuperscript{130} But, it is obvious from the above discussion itself that this conclusion is debatable since even after a few centuries at least the painters of Ajanta and Bagh around fifth or sixth century AD followed the same custom even through the medium of painted labels. It is noteworthy that Dehejia also suggests that these labels of Buddhist reliefs were added due to the viewers’ unfamiliarity with narratives and with

\textsuperscript{128} This is available in cave no 4.

Buddhism truly well established by the fifth century AD, the reason for labels of Ajanta is puzzling.  

A few decades before these interpretations of Amita Ray and Dehejia Deshpande had rightly observed that the old practice of giving labels in some manner was no more necessary, as the paintings revealed the subject with clarity, save when the subject was uncommon as in the case of 'Kshantivadi' Jātaka (in cave no 2) or was freely rendered like Sibi Jātaka (in cave no 17) where for easy identification the names of 'Kshantivadi' and 'Sibiraja' are mentioned below their figures. Certainly, since the labels of Ajanta were painted after completion of the paintings, it is obvious that the artist or the incumbent of the monasteries wished to leave no doubt about the identity of the legends. Therefore, it is more probable that the viewer was induced into the experience of understanding these extended narratives by a residential monk who guided the viewer through the course of the narratives since it seems near impossible for an ordinary viewer to manage without such direction due to the complex nature of the narration or the style, as well as the crowded nature of the stories. Thus, one may perhaps surmise that the painted labels like 'Sibiraja' or 'Indrah' were added to serve as prompts for the literate monks, or for the lay interpreters of the murals as discussed in the seventh chapter in detail.

Besides, it is noteworthy that in cave no 20 there is no painted inscription of the same nature as those found in other caves discussed above, but there is an inscription in

red paint in two lines on the left wall between the niche containing the figure of the Buddha and the second cell-door. The record is partially damaged and only a few letters here and there can be deciphered; mere fragmentary remains from which it is not unfortunately possible to deduce any intelligible meaning.\textsuperscript{134} Similarly, there is no painting anywhere in cave no 21, but there is an illegible inscription in red paint and several lines of big letters appear on the back wall of the veranda between the door and the window. The fourth line, however, seems to read: as \textit{"Dasaratha maṇḍana \ldots\"} In addition, there are traces of another similar inscription on the same wall to the left where the writing was done horizontally but unfortunately the letters are illegible.\textsuperscript{135} Hence, although this cave does not contain murals today, it is perhaps not unlikely that it was originally intended to decorate this cave also with the usual Jataka murals and that these records in red paint contained, for the guidance of the artists, the titles of particular scenes (perhaps from the Dasaratah Jataka in the above instance) which were to be painted on a particular portion of the wall.\textsuperscript{136} Most probably the painters themselves included these, since initially they had to divide the space on the walls for each of the stories before painting over them or it was done by the incumbents of the monasteries according to the needs of the Buddhist clients of the site.

However, when speaking of the styles of the Buddhist mural paintings of India and Sri Lanka due to non-availability of the evidence, one question that remains

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid, p.111.
unanswerable is: did the artist work from a master plan? According to these painted labels of Ajanta, which may have been for the guidance of the painters, it may be assumed that at least the artists of Ajanta worked according to a master plan most probably prepared by the painters themselves. Perhaps, the painters of other sites of the two countries would also have followed the same procedure.

The human form:

Besides these overall compositional arrangements and the painted labels, it is evident that the most important aspect of the style of the paintings of the two countries is the method of displaying the human form. At Ajanta, it is apparent that the human form has been represented in every possible variety of position and displays slight knowledge of anatomy. Attempts at foreshortening have been made with surprising success\textsuperscript{137} (Plates XVI, XVII and XVIII). Thus, the use of the visual balance is a characteristic aspect that should be noted about the human form in the paintings of Ajanta. In most cases, they show a symmetrical arrangement of compositions and symmetrical attitudes of figures. It is conspicuous that the figures often have a lyrical tribhanga attitude showing the visual balance.\textsuperscript{138} This rhythmic arrangement of the figures and their plastic presence are captivating to a viewer and sometimes even overwhelming, as in front of the Padmapani Bodhisattva in cave no 1.\textsuperscript{139}

It is obvious that the most expressive feature of the human body is the face. As is true throughout most of the Ajanta paintings, the three-quarter facial view is preferred in

the composition, creating a suggestion of depth and volume for the forms. The minute
details of facial expression, depth in the eyes, along with the beautiful physical postures
and natural anatomical details of the body, make the paintings of Ajanta more
impressive. Certainly, the eyes and lips of the faces that we come across on the walls of
Ajanta have their prototypes in real life (Plates XVI, XVII and XIX). The next emphasis
is mainly on the upper limbs of the body, the neck, the bust and the waist, but also on the
hips - delineated in detail and precision of forms than the lower parts. More often, the leg
appears to have been finished in a hurry and touched upon as little as possible. \(^{140}\)
Thus, the upper part of the body of the drawing gets romantic; the eyes are elongated and
heavy; the head is bent in sentimentality; rich and varied curls fall on both sides of the
head; the jewellery is especially displayed; and in dramatic poses of the fashionable
women there is an extra emphasis on youth and sensuality. \(^{141}\) Particularly the pitcher
like breasts, so full of warmth and shape stand in an incredible contrast to the slim waist.

The human form is drawn in varying sizes but the best are those of life size or
slightly over life size ones. It is evident that the movement of all the figures is rendered
with great expression and the artist was quite prepared to tackle three quarter, tail-or
head-on views of considerable difficulty, according to the needs of his imagined reality.
It is obvious that whoever painted these great murals were gifted with a highly developed
visual imagination. Each figure and each group is invented afresh not merely
compounded from stereotypes. \(^{142}\) Thus it is evident that the artists display a true

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\(^{40}\) Ingrid Aall, “The murals: Their art,” *Ajanta murals: An album of eighty-five reproductions in colour*, ed.


understanding of the human form in almost every case. Consequently, even the line
drawings give clarity to the figures. As a result the directions of the strokes form a pattern
that at the same time accentuates the form and this is particularly noticeable in the
representation of breasts of the women.\textsuperscript{143} Above all, the details testify to the supreme
understanding of humanity displayed by the artist in his ability to convey the mental
attitudes of the persons in the group.\textsuperscript{144}

In contrast, the fine contours expressing roundness, the delicate strokes inducing
deep sentiment and the qualified lines suggesting mental outlook have been well
combined in some of the best figures at Sigiriya, Ajanta and Bagh. In some cases though
in general similar features prevail, yet certain points are expressed differently. These may
be mainly detected in the face.\textsuperscript{145} For instance, one of the characteristic features that set the
Sigiriya women apart is the oval face that is hardly to be met with at Ajanta, despite the
large variety of faces there. Even the few faces of Sigiriya that are not particularly oval in
shape, but slightly squarish (Plate XX), are missing in the Ajanta murals. In addition, the
most remarkable difference is in the treatment of the eye. At Ajanta, the eye has been
employed as the vehicle of a verity of emotions (Plates XVI, XVII, XVIII and XIX). But,
the women of Sigiriya appear to express just one emotion with their eyes, irrespective of
the angle of the face. In keeping with the enigmatic emotion, the eyes and eyebrows have
been delineated without a tinge of the dramatic: all the eyes have the same natural almond
shape, unlike the Ajanta eyes which are usually defined by two curvy, almost parallel

\textsuperscript{143} Benjamin Rowland, The wall paintings of India Central Asia and Ceylon: A comparative study, Alfa
\textsuperscript{144} Nandadeva Wijesekara, Heritage of Sri Lanka, The Times of Ceylon, Colombo, 1984, p.123.
\textsuperscript{145} Nandadeva Wijesekera, Early Sinhalese painting, Saman Press, Maharagama, 1959, p.98.
lines which tend to exaggerate the length of the eyes and make them look half-closed.\textsuperscript{146} In addition, a small but by no means minor, different stylistic character of the Sigiriya paintings is the method of drawing the noses. There are in fact two distinct types of noses of ladies; in one, the nose is represented in profile although the face may be in three-quarter view, the second method shows the nose in three-quarter view with the further nostril clearly visible quite different from the facial views of Ajanta.

Another characteristic feature of the paintings of both countries is the treatment of gesture applied to all parts of the body especially pertaining to the hands. Such a symbolic usage helped in the delineation of modes and attitudes. By this means, the painter was able to convey deeper meaning. In addition, he also manipulated the hands of the figures to produce a harmonious balance in the whole composition. However, it is evident that certain gestures became stereotyped and were applied with specific meaning in the Buddhist religious paintings of both India and Sri Lanka.\textsuperscript{147} Thus, in Sigiriya the pose of each figure itself as well as the hands and the swaying bodies enter this symbolism, particularly the fingers not unlike those seen at Bagh. They were not empty hands and as at Ajanta, these carry flowers. Indeed the flowers themselves form a part of this symbolism but these remain unexplained today.\textsuperscript{148} Though badly damaged, it is evident that in the painting of Vessagiriya too, the position of the head, the mudra of the raised hand and the leaping or flying posture, all show this symbolism appropriately.\textsuperscript{149}

\textsuperscript{147} Nandadeva Wijesekera, Early Sinhalese painting, Saman Press, Maharagama, 1959, p.98.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid, pp.98-99.
As already noted the paintings in the Tivamka sanctum and in the Galviharaya of Polonnaruva do not show significant elements of style that connects them directly with the older paintings of Sigiriya, Vessagiriya or Gonagolla.\textsuperscript{150} This is evident from the symbolism too. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that they are not altogether lacking in the aesthetic qualities that one observes in the older paintings as well as in the contemporary paintings of the other sites of the Polonnaruwa epoch. Particularly, the bearded figures, Brahmas in Galviharaya and the group of deities in the antechamber of the Tivamka image house are executed in a sophisticated classical style as also are those in the scenes from the life story of the Buddha in the sanctum,\textsuperscript{151} which have been discussed in the sixth chapter in detail.

However, it is obvious that in both countries, the feminine physique was regarded as supremely lovely to be adored and venerated. Her face was compared repeatedly to the lotus while the delicacy of her skin found appropriate parallels in the exquisite softness of flowers, plants and trees.\textsuperscript{152} Thus, in the caves of Ajanta and also at Bagh, the feminine form is beautifully but freely and rhythmically depicted. In most cases, emotion and pathos of these ladies are expressed by the controlled turn and poise of the body and by the eloquent gestures of the hands. One of the most beautiful example of this is the painting commonly called the “dying princess” in cave no 16 at Ajanta.\textsuperscript{153}

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\item Douglas Barrett and Basil Gray, Treasures of Asia: Painting of India, ed. Albert Skira, The World Publishing co, Ohio, 1963, p.27.
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The figure has generally been depicted in group scenes and only on rare occasions it is shown in isolation. This is also applicable to the paintings of Sigiriya, Vessagiriya and Gonagolla.  

Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that the women of Sigiriya or of any other site of Sri Lanka have no real counterpart at Ajanta. These women are very different in detail from the innumerable queens and maids of Ajanta. It is of course true that there is no one single type of female figure at Ajanta, which could provide a convenient and convincing comparison. Although the ideal of female beauty is mostly the same in both India and Sri Lanka as already noted it is of course expressed in two different ways in the two countries, dramatic and dynamic at Ajanta, lyrical and gentle at the Sri Lankan sites. For instance, Ajanta women are depicted with small waist and vast rotund hips (Plates XVI, XVII and XXI). At Sigiriya on the other hand, not only is the physical type somewhat different- the waist is long, the hips narrow, the faces thin, the expression itself suggests a seriousness of purpose, a calm and solemn realisation of sinuous majesty even at times an enigmatic mystery (Plate XIII).

The lines and the draughtsmanship:

Two features related to the lines and draughtsmanship of Ajanta are present, both in the work of the early period as well as that of the later periods. There is firstly a remarkable fluidity and sweep of line and secondly an equally remarkable feeling for

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plasticity. As it appears today, the outline of the paintings of Ajanta is usually put in first in brown or black. Then came the colours and once more, on top of all another outline. The colour was thus filled in with flat washes on which the details of eyebrows and hair etc are painted. According to all these linear details, it is evident that the workmanship of Ajanta is in fact admirable; long subtle curves are drawn with great precision in a line of unvarying thickness with one sweep of the brush, both on the vertical surface of the walls and on the more difficult plane of the ceilings (Plate IX), showing consummate skill and manual dexterity. No doubt that the movement of these lines is sure and inevitable, without trick.

It is also evident that the lines of Ajanta reveal a creative dimension changing in its meaning according to the environment and placement of the object. For instance, the pressure of the brush makes the line appear thick or thin to yield the desired effect. Thick wide and deep lines became forms in themselves while thin sharp and precise lines take a calligraphic character. Even the colours of the lines assume different shades varying from red to dark brown and black depending on particular needs and very often changing from colour to colour within a limited area. The difference of artistic impact that lines can have when applied in modulation, as against mere graphic representation, can also be seen in the figures. Thus, the superb drawing renders more than the mere outline; it embodies modelling, relief, foreshortening and all the essential elements of the art. So carefully has the line been varied, qualified and graded that a strong feeling for living warmth is easily

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159 Ibid, p.8.
evident in these paintings. For instance, the famous “toilet scene” on the first right hand corner pilaster of the cave no 17 and the “lustration scene” of the Mahajanaka Jataka painted in cave no 1 are undoubtedly two of such masterpieces of the painter’s brush-work. According to all these features it is clear that the murals of Ajanta are essentially an art of line and these long sweeping brush strokes attained that apex of dexterity, which has made the Ajanta murals world famous for the quality of their line.

As in the case of the lines, the colour also remains cool and fresh; so that the paintings swiftly present themselves to the eye in the diffused light. Although parts of the design of Ajanta may now appear flat as mentioned above, it is apparent that originally there was a suggestion of relief through shading and highlights. For instance, in the figure of the apsaras at the right side of cave no. 17 there are traces of the highlights that originally gave saliency to the features, the sharp stroke of light pigment on the nose. Thus, in most cases, highlighting of certain areas, such as the nose or brow, helps to bring forth the form from the dim interior although light and shadow are not used in what might be called a scientific manner or to elucidate three-dimensionality as discussed later in detail. It seems that the artists used shading and highlighting at will to enhance their creations without regard for light as a phenomenon of the physical world, subject to certain empirical laws. Thus, it is evident that even the forms of the famous Bodhisattvas’ body are beyond the rules of the material world and indeed, by freeing the figures from such regulation, the artists seem to capture the essence of the Buddhist religion with its scepticism toward phenomenal existence. Consequently, while clearly

161 Shanti Swarup, *5000 years of arts and crafts in India and Pakistan*, DB Taraporevala sons & co, Bombay, 1968, p.133.
human in inspiration, parts of the Bodhisattva’s body are linked to other objects; his brow, for example, takes the shape of the archer’s bow, his eyes are like lotus petals and his torso is shaped like that of a lion. Such metaphors appear in textual descriptions and were often quite literally translated into visual terms.  

In contrast, the method of portraying the figures has been dissimilar in all cases at Sigiriya and is well revealed by the fact that the painters have left the original corrected lines as they were. Therefore the procedure adopted at the site can easily be understood. Initially, the outline of the figure was drawn on the surface of the plaster with a red colour and some of the corrections may still be seen. In some cases, even the positions of limbs were also altered. This fact is indicated by the presence of many erratic lines as well as by the presence of two hands which were later changed into another position leaving the original still there (Plate XII). Certainly, this line is also an equally expressive and confident sweep of the brush, but has been applied with an abandon that is startling in its impulsiveness. Due to these factors, although it is believed that the paintings of Sigiriya could be graphically described as line drawings with brush and paint, the style of Sigiriya clearly displays tendencies to the painting tradition rather than linear representations. Apart from the outlines, the linearity or its absence in the paintings is indeed a question of emphasis. There is no line work at Sigiriya unlike Ajanta that has followed the linear in technique to display every limb of the body perfectly as already

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noted, though the figures were defined by the outline drawings. But, it is noteworthy that in those areas where the colours are not too badly faded one can notice even the overlay of colour that was applied specifically to suppress these outlines. Consequently, at Sigiriya, it appears that the outline drawing was blended into the rest of the figure instead of being redrawn and picked in black or a darker colour, which was more the rule at Ajanta. Without doubt, all these features show that the technique favoured at Sigiriya is a painting tradition rather than linear representation.

However, as in the case of Ajanta, the draughtsmanship of Sigiriya was entirely freehand. This is particularly apparent when we note the above corrections or changes in the contours and alterations of the positions of the hands of certain figures. Hence, the draughtsmanship of Sigiriya can also unmistakably be considered excellent, measured by the best standards though some scholars have suggested that it is freer and looser than the Ajanta murals. The figures are carefully drawn. The important personality as intended by the painter also comes out at a glance. They express rhythmic movement infused with vitality that sways the supple bodies but still keeps them held fast to the ground. Every figure is stimulated with an urge that seems real and feminine. Consequently, every figure appears to be as an individual portrait that has received no less attention than another. Certainly, the composition is well balanced, the arrangement of the figures in the groups being pleasing. It is evident by the altered hands of the figures that the poses of the bodies

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168 Ibid, p.505.
and the position of every limb have been previously considered in the scheme in order to evolve such a fine rhythm throughout the paintings. 170

On the other hand, it has to be noted that much of the technical expertise one notices at Ajanta is conspicuously absent at Sigiriya particularly, in relation to their colouration. In this process, in fact, colour is applied flat without any attempt at highlighting with white or a lighter tone of the particular colour unlike the murals of Ajanta. Instead, contours and depressions such as under the lower lip or around the eyes and nose etc are darkened by repeated brush strokes. Also, there is no attempt at foreshortening or at suggesting depth. Sometimes, it might be observed that such devices were useful aids for the painters of Ajanta in depicting narrative scenes as already mentioned above but not necessarily, so for the Sigiriya artists who painted only single figures cut off at the waist. 171

Besides Sigiriya, it is evident from the appearance itself that the Hindagala painting is technically remote from the Ajanta murals although some authorities tend to see the Ajanta manner in this painting too as they do also in those of Sigiriya. 172 Instead, as a matter of fact there may be an unmistakably close kinship between the Sigiriya paintings and the Hindagala murals. Particularly, at Hindagala the process of outline drawing bears a resemblance to that of Sigiriya the colours used being also the same. But, the final correction has been more complete or no corrections have been made at all unlike the Sigiriya paintings. Consequently, no original unwanted lines are obtainable in the Hindagala painting. But, it is evident that these murals are also clearly in a technique that

is painting rather than linear as in the case of the murals of Sigiriya. As a result, although the lines are well drawn, it is difficult to find lines that can be described as clear, articulate or strong. The outline, which must necessarily have been used for defining forms is indeed no longer visible, being assiduously submerged under heavy, brush strokes unlike the murals at Ajanta. However, it is obvious that the Hindagala painting is inferior to any of the Sigiriya paintings as a work of art and looks more the creation of a provincial artist who, though a capable one, lacked much of the sophistication of the painters of Sigiriya.

When considering other contemporary mural sites of Sri Lanka, e.g. paintings at Vessagiriya and Gonagolla it is evident that much of the colour has badly faded. But, fortunately time has left sufficient details of the outlines that point clearly in the direction of the Sigiriya paintings as parallels. Of these remaining portions, the female figure at Gonagolla is one of the most outstanding representations of the graceful and sensuous feminine form, in many respects more sensitively delineated than the women of Sigiriya. Certainly, the mastery of line displayed in this painting is of the highest order and speaks well for the technical competence of its producer, although the whole painting is now in a dilapidated condition.

However, the remaining specimens at Mihintale relic vault can hardly be called paintings; they are indeed at best monochrome drawings that can be very instructive as

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documents that will throw some light on the technique and methods employed by the Buddhist mural painters of ancient Sri Lanka (Plate IV). Consequently, these mural paintings of Mihintale clearly prove that the Sigiriya style had continuity for another few centuries to a considerable extent. The figures have been sketched in outline only, red and black being the pigments used, but are of high artistic quality indicating that the artist possessed skill in draughtsmanship, a subtle sense of form and an understanding of the principles of balanced compositions. A vertical line or a plumb line divides each scene into two that must have been drawn by the artist as an aid to balanced grouping of the figures. The effect, however, is perfectly satisfying where the spatial organisation and the planar distribution of individual figures are concerned.\textsuperscript{176}

Although the Mahiyangana relic chamber paintings are appreciably different in style from the earliest paintings such as those of Sigiriya and Hindagala as well as from the later murals or the popular tradition of the Tivamka shrine, they indicate the same style and possess the same high artistic merit as the pictures at Ajanta and those of the classical tradition at the Tivamka shrine. The two remaining paintings also differ from each other in detail although some superficial similarities can be observed that place them in a shared provincial setting compared to the more sophisticated art of metropolitan Polonnaruwa or Sigiriya.\textsuperscript{177} However, though perhaps not contemporary with the Mihintale relic chamber drawing, these Mahiyangana paintings are also of similar tenor and are meant to fulfil the same purpose. The symbolism is also quite


obviously the same in both cases. It is apparent that compared to the Dimbulagala paintings, which will be discussed later the Mahiyangana paintings would appear to be the work of an artist who was appreciably more competent\textsuperscript{178} (Plates VI and VIII).

As at Sigiriya and Hindagala, at Mahiyanganaya murals too one could detect the hand, not of a draughtsman but, rather, of a painter. The lines are not tense, wiry or clean but heavily over-drawn. Nevertheless, these lines are expressive and there is delicate shading also.\textsuperscript{179} However, the most attractive aspect in the Mahiyangana painting is the suppleness of the slender bodies of deities displayed in the graceful curves of the torsos in the classical \textit{tribhanga} pose. The heads and the fingers elegantly flexed, as in a dance pose are unmistakably classical in their effect. These figures present a solid appearance that can only be attributed to the heaviness of the line work.\textsuperscript{180}

It seems that the last gasps of the Sigiriya style were seen in the paintings on the vestibules of Anuradhapura.\textsuperscript{181} Of these, the painting found in the eastern vestibule of Ruvanvalisaya presents certain distinguishing elements. It is apparent that this has been executed from start to finish in paint. But, the drawings of animals of mythical birds and men betray a lack of observation and poor draughtsmanship, as these are in fact badly drawn. These very elements may have been borrowed from the popular tradition that would have been in use at the time, as in the case of the later paintings of the Tivamka image house, though these are somewhat similar to the ceiling ornamentation of Ajanta.

\textsuperscript{179} DB Dhanapala, \textit{The story of Sinhalese painting}, Saman Press, Maharagama, 1957, p.18.
\textsuperscript{181} DB Dhanapala, \textit{The story of Sinhalese painting}, Saman Press, Maharagama, 1957, p.36.
However, the compositions are harmonious and nicely balanced. The style is less elaborate though the drawings were done free hand.\(^4\)

The style and the lines at Maravidiya of Dimbulagala compares well with that of the earliest phase of the Tivamka shrine murals. In fact, some of the outlines may be said to be even better than the Polonnaruva period’s productions. These linear drawings are beautifully executed by free hand.\(^5\) Besides, a good composition with harmony and balance is the group of figures at Pulligoda of Dimbulagala itself. From what remains one may infer that here was a school of draughtsmen of good ability and considerable skill (Plate III). In contrast, the Dimbulagala painting establishes the skill of artists to use animals, leaves and flowers to adorn the walls as in the case of the ceiling paintings at Ajanta. Of these, unfortunately only the outline drawn bold free hand in black or dark grey remains. This outline itself may be considered as a finished product, since very few corrected lines remain. The paint has been applied later but probably was meant to convey no modelling effect. In the decorative designs also the same method has been used.\(^6\) Thus, comparatively, the paintings of cave no 2 at Maravidiya and the larger series at Tivamka shrine show skilled workmanship, those at the former site being even better. The freedom of the draughtsmanship has been restricted by having to follow the regular standard types in detail. In spite of such a restriction, much pleasing beauty of forms has been obtained. Figures lack vigour and life but excel in the quality of serenity and calm contemplation. Devotion has been the keynote of this draughtsmanship. The anatomical details are correct but convey a sense of rigidity. The paintings approach thick


\(^5\) Ibid, p.85.

\(^6\) Ibid, p.80.
watercolour drawing and consequently, what one sees are flat surfaces bearing paint but no contours with depth to show signs of flesh and blood.\footnote{185}

It is, however, apparent that the outlines of the figures at all these places were drawn in a medium red colour similar in all cases except at Dimbulagala, where a dark grey almost amounting to black has been used. The corrected lines show later alterations visible in most of the examples just like the paintings of Sigiriya. Of these, the line work of the early paintings of Tivamka image house has been done with great finesse: it is clearly the work of a well-learned master. Delicate as they are, the lines are thoroughly articulate and betray no hesitation.\footnote{186} In this process, it is evident that the original outline is in red but black and white lines are also visible.\footnote{187} The outlines thus drawn have been later filled up with paint with the necessary corrections, alteration or modifications as required. Even the brushwork is a drawing of line but the rendering has been bold and free hand with a firm and sure exercise of the brush. Repeated applications of the brush with paint in circular movement in some cases clearly prove that some at least of the figures are not merely painted but have been modelled in colour. In the delineation of the shoulders and the region of the breast, this feature is stressed. Obviously, each figure has received special attention.\footnote{188}

According to all these features, it is evident that the painters of Polonnaruva epoch were capable, though it may not be to the same degree as those of Ajanta. Of balanced composition, their work possessed beauty of line and created forms of majestic grace. Their line is subtle, contrasting with the strongly and swiftly drawn lines of the Sigiriya
But, in contrast, the main features clearly show that at least seven centuries have elapsed and the classical tradition has taken a conventional turn; the scheme of red-yellow-green and the bold Sigiriya brushwork remain. Particularly, the larger figures at Tivamka image house display clever line drawings (Plate II). For instance, the figure of the Bodhisattva in the sanctum is given the pride of place. Just by the entrance to the image house, it shows the same excellence of line and brush work, same strength and richness in colour as displayed at Sigiriya and is in fact reminiscent of the famous Bodhisattva Padmapani of Ajanta.

Nevertheless, it may be admitted that a weak display of linear work manifests itself in the portrayal of the scenes from the Jatakas and the life story of the Buddha in the same shrine room (Plate XV). The style is also almost different. The lines are crooked and curves have lost the rhythm and present a seemingly degenerate appearance. Its aim was expressive narration. The design work shows the same technique and brevity of expression. Again, the lines lack grace and meaning. They differ also in the facial features and the general sense of movement apparent in the bodies of the deities in adoration of the Buddha. Nevertheless, it is apparent that the painting fragments in the Galviharaya of Polonnaruva surpass all the works at Tivamka shrine though they are now in a very bad state of preservation. Although these were primarily paintings, it is really in

188 Ibid, pp.79-80.
the skill of draughtsmanship that the painters show mastery. One is reminded of the Sigiriya linear expression and curves but feels that the quality is a shade inferior though both belong to the same style.  

However, all the Sri Lankan paintings discussed so far are merely the vestiges, the barest indications of what must have been magnificent murals, all of them executed in a similar artistic manner which can best be described as painting tradition than linear representation unlike the murals at Ajanta and Bagh. But, it is noteworthy that in some instances, one cannot fail to recognise a great deal of emphasis laid on the wiry tension of the thinnest of lines; drawn with an eye for their admirable delicacy, they demonstrate the sureness of the practised hand of an expert draughtsmanship, as in the case of the early phase murals at the Tivamka image house in Polonnaruwa.

**The colours and their application:**

As already noted, since drawing was the first step in the creation of murals, it maintained its predominance and colours were used only for its formative and embellishing needs. Thus, the use of pigment is evident in the making of forms, perspective and rhythm etc. In most cases, the precise choice of a colour was prescribed by the figurative meaning of the object and was mostly rendered in pigment such as we find them in nature. In this context, it is noteworthy that as is usually done, the colours have been applied by the painters of Ajanta in a particular order so that the foreground appears brighter and the background darker. The white has again modified this effect and

petals strewn all over, to regain the link and continuous colour dialogue. But, unlike the Sri Lankan painting sites since the light is very dim in the interiors in the caves of Ajanta as well as at Bagh, it is apparent that when devotees enter these caves from the outer atmosphere of bright sunlight, initially they see nothing but darkness. However, once the eyes are accustomed to the darkness, gradually the light coloured masses are noticed. As the groups of figures are usually of lighter tone against the darker red, green or brown background as mentioned above, they are seen first. Then gradually, the other forms are noticed. Thus, the figures also show a subtle variation and not a sharp contrast in the body colours. So instead of individual separation of the figure, the total group is separated from the background. The story of Simhalavadana is one of the best examples in this regard where the large area of the dark background is broken by fair figures in order to lessen its impact.

It is obvious that the application of colours in the foreground used for creating human figures is more complex. In some cases, these human forms appear in three dimensions and the search for form compelled the artist to explore the textual possibilities of colour application, for giving convexity to the surface. Brush strokes, which play an important role in modern paintings, were not perhaps in vogue in the days of Ajanta though the outlines and the final touches have been used by the painters at the site. Certainly, the impress of such brush strokes also becomes evident only in selected instances when delineating body contours, facial details or in elaborate coiffures as also in

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197 Ananda Coomaraswamy, History of Indian and Indonesian art, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, (reprinted) 1972, pp.89-90; SK Bhattacharya, The story of Indian art, Atma Ram and sons, Delhi, 1966, p.49.
the ornamentation of the ceilings. Accordingly, it is clear that most of the artistic qualities like roundness, light and shade etc of the figures mainly depend on the method of application of colours instead of their lines.

However, it is certainly amazing that the painters of Ajanta created the vocabulary of the entire colour-range with only six primary pigments; each speaking its own language and giving meaning to others. Far from dramatising by climaxing colour-contrasts, the Ajanta painter took recourse to the more refined expression of tonalities. Sometimes, in this process of colouration, a renewed outline in brownish red or black, with some shading, was employed to give an impression of roundness or relief, rather than to indicate the effect of light and shade. Consequently, it is apparent that in the finest phase, both line and colour are used together for the plastic modelling of forms. But, this modelling in line and colour is employed with all other possibilities of shading so as to produce the illusion of volume and to give the painted figures the quality of sculpture.

Although this feature cannot be identified in the oldest paintings of Ajanta, in most of the later paintings the use of light areas of figures with dark or undifferentiated areas against elaborate backgrounds corresponded in part to the contrasts created by the effects of the play of light upon figures. According to the principles of modern painting, this method of applying colours would be termed the technique of chiaroscuro (treatment of light and shade).

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201 The Italian term chiaroscuro gives the literary meaning of light and shade. In fact, according to the modern acceptance this is the heart and soul of many great paintings. Under this heading comes the greatest subtlety and it is the part of a painting, which in execution needs the most observation and the greatest mastery. See The Pergamon dictionary of art, ed. John Fitzmanrice Mills, Pergamon Press, Oxford, London, 1965, p.41.
the light and dark parts in the painting). But, in most cases of Ajanta this is managed without genuine chiaroscuro or cast shadows and solely through tonal modelling. In this technique closely related to highlighting, rather than the mode of chiaroscuro, the artist achieved the effect of emphasis by white patches (now yellowish because of the early chemical treatments) appearing on the chin, breasts, arms, legs or wherever an elevation of form was desired. For instance, in some figures like the Bodhisattvas, his consorts and attendants the flesh parts thus appear to be modelled in light and shade. Certainly, this chiaroscuro has nothing to do with any effects of elimination. Thus, in a completely arbitrary way areas of shadow are placed on both sides of the Bodhisattva in cave no. 1 and in some of the dark-skinned attendants bold highlights are painted on the saliency’s of features and body to further enhance the feeling of existence in the round.

In addition, it is significant that some paintings at Ajanta demonstrate the use of dots to achieve a kind of shading by stippling. This technique implies the use of a thin brush to prick the surface of the painting with innumerable tiny touches. It is a technique similar to that of the pointillists. The Ajanta artist however, did not use different colours, as did the impressionists but only different shades of the same colour, mostly brown. Stippling was taken recourse to on the edges of a form, with darker colours upon lighter background to round it off. In terms of the concentration of dots, this process of shading

gives modelling effects to body parts by degrees. The flying angels on the ceiling of the inner shrine of cave no 2 at the site show this technique at its best.\textsuperscript{206}

Besides, in some instances, shorter brush strokes were also employed in combination with varying shades of the same colour or almost similar colours to achieve the moulding of faces and bodies. For instance, the highlights on the noses and chins of the dark brown figures are not produced by wiping out the colour, but by applying a light yellow faint over the brown. Again below the eyelids of some figures blue streaks have been painted to represent shade, which serve their purpose extremely well.\textsuperscript{207} In contrast, there is no deliberate shading, as we understand the term in a modern art school. Instead, shades of colour lighten and darken almost imperceptibly, creating roundness of surfaces and undulations of the body.\textsuperscript{208} It is thus apparent that in most cases at Ajanta the modelling is tied to the contour; it is almost a ‘function’ of the contour and arises naturally from it. It darkens or intensifies the colour of the parts which turn away towards the edge of the form and recede from the eye, whilst those parts of the surface of a form which are intended to be nearest to the eye are sometimes emphasised by patches of clear, bright colour and sometimes by a sparse brushing of the main tint which allows the white ground to show through. This heightened effect of plasticity that results is the same as that which nylon stockings give to a girl’s legs, giving them an added ‘presence.’\textsuperscript{209}

\textsuperscript{208} Karl Khandalavala, The development of style in Indian painting, Macmillan, Madras, 1974, p.32.
\textsuperscript{209} Philip S Rawson, Indian painting, Pierre Tisue, Editor, Paris, 1961, p.29.
This feature of deepening of the contour to emphasise the modelling although common to both the sites of Ajanta and Bagh is more pronounced at Bagh. Other similarities and differences with regard to the use of colours, between the works of Bagh which exist in cave no 4 and that of Ajanta are: the artists first sketched the outline with Indian red, after which they gradually modelled the figurative composition. Then the highlights, the deep shadows and the most delicate touches of colours were applied and finally black was used for details such as eyebrows, hair etc. Of these steps, except for the first few proceedings, the last touches of black lines however are absent in the paintings at Bagh. Thus it is apparent that at Bagh there are no traces of outline to give relief or light and shade to give it body unlike the murals of Ajanta, it is through simplicity and in a simple manner that the greatest effect has been achieved. Accordingly, it is conspicuous that stylistically, the Bagh figures are more tightly modelled than at Ajanta. A damaged painting in the veranda of Rang Mahal cave i.e. cave no 4 mentioned above representing a group of girl musicians and dancers gathered in a circle round a male dancer, is a glaring example in this regard. In contrast, though the style is common at both the sites of Ajanta and Bagh, in some aspects the paintings at Bagh seem to represent a different tradition from those at Ajanta.

Apart from the qualities of modelling and chiaroscuro, three-dimensional appearance is also one of the most important aspects of intrinsic worth of a painting. But,

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212 S Fyzee Rahamin, *The Indian art of drawing pictures in the caves of Bagh*, The Indian Daily Mail, Bombay, 1928, p.11.
an observant eye notices that the three-dimensional appearance of the figures of Ajanta is not a common element. This does not mean that no attempt was made to indicate this aspect at any rate or that the painters did not know the rules of depicting three-dimensional forms at all. The only difference is that the painter reversibly achieved a three-dimensional effect by means of shade and highlight where the forms instead of being projected in the depth were made forthcoming. On the other hand, he did introduce another kind of dimension: through painting concepts and ideas. Rather than representational scenes he created a spatial dimension, which we may call the 'mental space’ today. Thus, though rarely, three-dimensional effects can be found among the paintings of Ajanta as in the case of the pavilion in the scene of the sleeping figure of Mahamaya in the life story of the Buddha in cave no 16, which will be discussed later.

Besides these three-dimensional effects, at first sight, one would think that the paintings of Ajanta are based on true optical perspective according to their method of presentation of the stories. Yet it is not the law of perspective, as we understand the term today, which governs the plasticity. Instead, it is evident that the painters of Ajanta designed heightened perspective to build up different plans and bring them together, so that at times they are telescoped into each other. In this process there is neither a fixed focal point that leads the eye from larger to smaller objects in recession nor any perspective in depth drawing the eye towards a vanishing point or a horizon-line. On the contrary, the same scene is often seen simultaneously from different angles. Due to these facts, some critics complained of the lack of perspective in the paintings of

Ajanta.\textsuperscript{217} Unquestionably, this may be true to a certain extent of the earlier paintings, but in the fifth or sixth century AD the painters understood how to convey the idea of depth or distance in their work as already noted.\textsuperscript{218} The subject of the interior wall of cave no 1 for instance, represents a scene from the Mahajanaka Jataka. The Bodhisattva is sitting in a pavilion and servants are pouring water over his head. The drawing of the pillars clearly shows depth and the same idea is also conveyed by the position of the different figures, which are painted in the mural\textsuperscript{219} (Plate XVI). Thus, in the \textit{Abhiseka} scene, painted in the back corridor, particularly the drawing of the pillared hall unmistakably shows that the artist was by then familiar with perspective since he has admirably conveyed the idea of distance from front to back, in the drawing of the pillars. Similarly, on the right wall of cave no 16, in the birth scene of the Buddha, wherein queen Maya is shown lying on a couch in a circular pavilion, the drawing of the pavilion is perfect and it is apparent that one who did not possess a sense of perspective thoroughly could not have drawn a circular object so accurately.\textsuperscript{220}

Although in these two cases as in many other cases the law of very perspective has been seemingly obeyed, yet they give rise to curious anomalies. For example, the way that the facades of the pavilions have been drawn, one would imagine the spectator was right

\textsuperscript{217} For instance, Mukharji stated that Ajanta painters no attention is paid to perspective or to an effective adjustment of light and shade. See TN Mukharji, \textit{Art manufactures of India}, Navrang, New Delhi, 1974, p.13.
\textsuperscript{218} Nevertheless, Kramrisch believes that the paintings of Ajanta do not converge towards a point in depth, but diverge from such a point into the picture space. See Stella Kramrisch, \textit{The art of India: Traditions of Indian sculpture painting and architecture}, Phaidon Press, London, 1954, p.46.
in front and placed in dead centre. But at the same time, the spectator is able to see the pavilions from their side and the sides recede backwards, which could only happen if the spectator were viewing each pavilion from one of its corners or even its side. This optical anomaly occurred because of the fact that the artist was not painting pavilions according to the reality (Plates XVI and XXI). The pavilions of the Vidhurapandita Jataka story painted in cave no 2 are the glaring examples in this regard. As a result, if one extended the receding lines of the two pavilions indefinitely toward the line of the horizon, one would find them forming into two groups of diagonals or vanishing traces as they are called, moving away from each other to merge into two different vanishing points. This leads to the conclusion that the spectator's place is far from being fixed at the mouth of the alleyway between the two pavilions. Rather, he is right inside the passage and what is more, taking turns to have a good look at the pavilion on the left and then on the one at the right. At each turn, he is securing a perspective that is empirically true. At the same time, the diagonals on the sides are more sharply defined with the result that the pavilions gain in depth and look truly palatial in their proportions.

In addition, it is apparent that while pavilions and pillars that are depicted in these paintings of Ajanta are mostly seen from below or at eye level, roofs, trees, plants and flowers are seen as if from above. Beholders not used to this kind of varied and fanciful representation may find it disorganised and difficult to comprehend. But, one should not assume that the artist relied on this technique not knowing what he did. Because, in effect this rotating perspective of multiple vision gives the spectator a feeling of being one with

the scene, as if he himself is a partner in the general commotion. Thus it is noteworthy that the architectural construction and the stone block as viewed from below at eye-level at Ajanta proves that the painters knew quite well the general phenomenon of visual perspective of how the object appears from various eye levels and how the lines converge. It appears that they used it purposely in a particular way to achieve the effect of bringing the forms forward to the surface level.

In contrast, the natural perspective is rare in the human and animal forms at Ajanta though it is noticeable in architectural elements to a certain extent. Thus, it is apparent that most of the time Ajanta painters have neglected the natural rules of perspectives. One of the best examples in this regard is in the composition of Buddha preaching to the congregation in cave no 17. Certainly, from the point of view of linear perspective Buddha’s figure should be comparatively smaller than the other figures since he is seated far beyond the others. Instead, it is rendered slightly larger in proportion to the others. Consequently, this added proportion gives him almost a superhuman existence and at the same time, it has a strange effect of bringing him to the foreground level. The other and more direct way of emphasising the figure is by showing the huge figure of Buddha with the begging bowl and the figures of Yasodara and Rahula much smaller in front of Buddha contrary to the visual perspective (Plate XXII). Sometimes these may have been done purposely, since artists needed present the Buddha figure more conspicuously than the rest, according to the belief of his superhuman nature.

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It may however be said that the colour scheme as a whole differs in quality at each site of the two countries. Probably, this may be due to the local setting and light effects. In contrast to the Ajanta artist who had a wide range of colours, at Sigiriya the choice was among three pigments; red, yellow and green. In the process of colouration, the method followed of over coating is perhaps an attempt to get round the natural paucity of earth colours. But, it is noteworthy that except for such touches of greens there are no other examples of over coatings at Sigiriya whereas at Ajanta in certain places whole scenes have been over painted. Although the techniques are the same at both sites to a considerable extent as discussed in the fifth chapter in detail, as in the case of blues, the use of white at Ajanta and its absence from the palette of the painters of Sigiriya has a significance that goes beyond the merely technical into the sphere of aesthetics and style, setting the two groups of paintings apart. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that though used quite generously at Ajanta, white is not treated there as a colour in the same way as are the others. It is what one might call a service colour, an auxiliary one; it serves only to produce lighter tones of other colours and different hues so as to create light and shade, calculated to produce the effect of roundness or volume.

In general, the same gradation of colour and tones can be seen at Sigiriya to a considerable extent. Particularly, the golden yellows and reds at Sigiriya resemble those of Ajanta to a large extent though this continues throughout the Sri Lankan paintings. But, nowhere in Sri Lanka can the dark yet refined body colours as used both at Ajanta and Bagh be observed. In addition, it is obvious that the plastic effect of colour comes out

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at Sigiriya but never in the same degree as at Ajanta and Bagh. This effect is also obtained by modelling in dark and light colours not by play of dark and light surfaces. It is interesting, in all cases, the hair treatment in a bold colour was probably a technical device common to both traditions for enhancing facial beauty by the juxtaposition of dark and light colours. Except Sigiriya and Hindagala, another feature common to all these paintings, is the strengthening of outlines in bolder strokes of the brush though the rhythm, effect and quality of the lines are different from site to site. This certainly helped to impart a definition to the figures. In addition, these bold outlines emphasised the contours of form as well.\textsuperscript{229}

As at Sigiriya, the colours of Hindagala are also limited and in tones they are lighter unlike those in India. This may have been probably due to their open positions where more light was present. However, the Dimbulagala painting also shows brighter reds and yellows, much faded no doubt, compared to the dull brownish red of the Mahiyangana painting. Nevertheless, in both cases, the line work is broad and hesitant and lacks the finesse of the linear compositions of the murals in the Tivamka image house.\textsuperscript{230} In this context, it is obvious that the larger figures at Tivamka image house that belong to the classical tradition present a purity of expression and a fine gradation of colour. In most cases, sober colours have been used to produce impressive effects though a sense of relief is absent. Thus, it is evident that the paintings of the early phase of the Tivamka image house despite a lapse of almost seven centuries after the classical tradition of Sigiriya is still astonishingly alive as mentioned above. Certainly, both in


\textsuperscript{229} Nandadeva Wijesekera, Early Sinhalese painting, Saman Press, Maharagama, 1959, p.97.
colour scheme and in technique of application of colours as well as their visual effects, they closely resemble the Sigiriya paintings; but most of their figures, which belong to a popular or the later tradition, are more stylistic and less realistic. In these later murals, the scenes are treated with great care; palaces and houses, gardens and forests, flowers, chariots and horses are also not mere accessories to the background, but essential elements of the pictures themselves. Nevertheless, it is conspicuous that the plants and trees are much more than decorative though they express the inner life and spirit of tropical vegetation better, perhaps, than any other medieval Indian and Sri Lankan schools. However, it is obvious that the colouration at Maravidiya also resembles that at the Tivamka shrine. Although it lacks depth and plastic quality, the force of presentation seems superior in the Polonnaruva shrines.

In contrast, it is remarkable how the ancient Sri Lankan artist achieved such signal of success with only three colours of red, yellow and green. In most cases, the judicious variations of the thickness of the outlines as well as the shading with small thin lines have been resorted to achieve three-dimensional effect. Limbs have been foreshortened where necessary without a semblance of distortion. But, when attention is focused on the effect of light and shade quality of Sri Lankan paintings, it is obvious that Sigiriya or any other ancient painting sites of the island nowhere show shadows cast outside the figures or on them unlike the paintings of Ajanta and Bagh. In fact it is evident that at least no


231 RV Leyden and HLM Williams (eds), Catalogue of the exhibition of Sarkis Katchadorian: Sinhalese frescoes from Sigiriya and Polonnaruva. Bombay Art Society Salon, May 17-27, 1940, Introduction; For further details on the special characteristics of the paintings of Tivamka shrine, particularly belong to the popular tradition please refer to M. Somathilake, A historical study of mural paintings in Buddhist temples during the 18th and 19th centuries of Sri Lanka, Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Peradeniya, 1996, chapter one.
attempt has been made to show the phenomenon of shadows and light and shade effects. Only dark and light colours remained instead. It may be mainly due to the local setting and light effect at the sites as already mentioned above. However, it would appear from the paintings at Sigiriya that lighter and darker areas were indicated by the thickness of the pigment, varied during preparation or by the application of repeated layers of the same colour. As in the case of Sigiriya, the paintings of Hindagala and Polonnaruva also use the technique of shading by means of lines instead of using colours unlike the murals of Ajanta and Bagh. In addition, in the arrangements of figures, as in the case of the effect of light and shade, no true perspective is observed in the Sri Lankan paintings at least to the same degree as the Indian paintings. It is obvious that figures were arranged in rows one behind the other to show depth as evidenced by the murals of Hindagala, Tivamka shrine and Galvihara etc unlike the paintings of Ajanta and Bagh. This may have been followed at Sigiriya also if there had been such groups in the ancient time.

Thus, according to all these descriptions, it is clear that not all the elements seen at Ajanta and Bagh can account for the Sigiriya murals or any other ancient painting site of Sri Lanka. In contrast, it is evident that each school or institution, more clearly the individual sites, demonstrates a different tradition instead. Therefore, apart from the similarities noticed by early scholars, some conspicuous inconsistencies or dissimilarities can also be seen between these ancient Buddhist mural painting traditions of India and Sri Lanka.

232 CE Godakumbura, Murals at Tivamka Pilimage, Archaeological Department, Colombo, 1969, p.16.
Lanka. This is particularly noticeable in respect to the fields of dividing space, compositional arrangements, method of displaying figures, particularly the physiognomical features and the human forms, introductory notes on the murals i.e. painted labels, lines, colouration, visual effects etc, all in relation to their styles. On the other hand as already mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, it has to be realized that such minute similarities can certainly be noted among any artistic tradition, specially in the Buddhist context, due to their thematic and spiritual linkage. Owing to this fact, it is to be noted that although there are obvious dissimilarities between the paintings and the carvings of any period or given region since they represent two distinct artistic traditions of the different artists or artistic schools, most of the writers who have discussed the murals of Ajanta have compared the similarities between the paintings and the reliefs thereof with Bharhut, Sanchi and Amaravati, Pitalkhora etc.237 Under this condition, it is noteworthy that though they are completely different two distinct artistic traditions in the sense of their thematic and spiritual linkage some scholars have noticed very close similarities between the Buddhist art of Ajanta and later Sopocani christian art in Yugoslavia too.238


In contrast, although there is no denying the long-standing cultural affinities between India and Sri Lanka as already discussed in the first and second chapters in detail in the widest sense of sharing many religious and ethical tenets, social conventions, artistic and aesthetic values and of course a world view, in reality, there is hardly any proof to support the view that Ajanta or Bagh is the model for Sigiriya, Hindagala or any other ancient painting site of Sri Lanka.\textsuperscript{239} Indeed, in spite of some minute points of resemblance in style, draughtsmanship, colour, colour effect and spirit etc. Sri Lankan paintings manifest a feeling of difference from the paintings of peninsular India. It should not be forgotten that though these similarities between the two painting traditions of India and Sri Lanka are obviously minute in character, it is possible that there may be some reasons for such similarities of styles such as different guilds following the same Buddhist \textit{silpa} text that we do not have evidence of today, which will be discussed in the next chapter in detail.