ISSN (Online): 2455-3662
EPRA International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research (IJMR) - Peer Reviewed Journal
Volume: 12| Issue: 4| April 2026|| Journal DOI: 10.36713/epra2013 || SJIF Impact Factor 2026: 8.753 || ISI Value: 1.188

ART AND ARCHITECTURE DURING THE MAURYAN PERIOD

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.36713/epra27324
DOI No: 10.36713/epra27324

ABSTRACT

The Mauryan period (c. 322–185 BCE) marks a transformative phase in the history of Indian art and architecture, characterized by imperial patronage, technological advancement, and ideological expression. This era witnessed the emergence of monumental stone architecture, including pillars, stupas, and rock-cut caves, reflecting both political authority and religious devotion. The reign of Ashoka, in particular, catalysed artistic innovation through the propagation of Buddhist ideals and the use of inscriptions as a medium of communication. Mauryan art is distinguished by its polished stone surfaces, symbolic motifs, and synthesis of indigenous and external influences, notably Achaemenid Persian elements. This paper examines the stylistic features, material culture, and socio-political contexts that shaped Mauryan artistic production.

KEYWORDS: *Mauryan Empire, Ashokan pillars, stupa architecture, rock-cut caves, ancient Indian art, Buddhist patronage*

INTRODUCTION

The Mauryan Empire (c. 322–185 BCE) represents the first large-scale political unification of the Indian subcontinent under a centralized authority. Founded by Chandragupta Maurya and expanded under rulers such as Bindusara and Ashoka, the empire not only established administrative and economic stability but also fostered significant cultural and artistic developments. The Mauryan period is particularly notable for its transition from perishable materials like wood to more durable stone, marking a turning point in the history of Indian art and architecture **(Singh, 2008).** Art and architecture during this period were deeply intertwined with political ideology and religious transformation. Under Ashoka's patronage, Buddhist principles were widely disseminated through monumental constructions such as stupas, pillars, and rock-cut caves **(Thapar, 1997).** These structures served both religious and propagandistic purposes, reinforcing imperial authority while promoting moral and ethical values encapsulated in the concept of *Dhamma*. The distinctive features of Mauryan art include highly polished sandstone surfaces, monumental scale, and symbolic motifs such as lions, lotuses, and wheels (*chakra*). The famous Ashokan pillars, for instance, exemplify technical sophistication and aesthetic refinement, often crowned with intricately carved animal capitals. These works also reveal cross-cultural influences, particularly from Achaemenid Persian art, visible in their form, craftsmanship, and decorative elements.

This paper aims to analyse the evolution, characteristics, and significance of Mauryan art and architecture within its historical and cultural context. By examining archaeological evidence, inscriptions, and stylistic features, the study seeks to understand how artistic production during the Mauryan period functioned as a medium of political expression, religious communication, and cultural synthesis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly research on Mauryan art and architecture highlights its significance as a foundational phase in Indian artistic development. Studies by **Romila Thapar (1997, 2002)** emphasize the role of the Mauryan state, particularly under Ashoka, in using art as a medium of political communication and moral governance through the concept of *Dhamma*.

Art historians such as **Percy Brown (1959)** and **Benjamin Rowland (1977)** focus on the technical and stylistic aspects of Mauryan architecture, especially the development of monolithic pillars and the transition from wood to stone construction.

The religious and cultural dimensions of Mauryan art have been discussed by **A. L. Basham (1962),** who highlights the influence of Buddhism in shaping architectural forms such as stupas and monasteries. Similarly, **Upinder Singh (2008)** situates Mauryan art within its broader socio-political and economic context, emphasizing the role of urbanization and imperial resources.

Further, **Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1972)** examines the symbolic and aesthetic aspects of early Indian art, while Kumar (2020) points to the influence of Achaemenid Persian and Hellenistic traditions on Mauryan artistic forms.

Overall, existing scholarship establishes that Mauryan art and architecture were shaped by a combination of political authority, religious ideology, and cross-cultural interactions, though a comprehensive integrated analysis remains necessary.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative and historical research methodology to examine the art and architecture of the Mauryan period. The research is descriptive and analytical in nature, focusing on interpreting the development, features, and significance of Mauryan artistic traditions within their historical context. The study is based on secondary sources, including scholarly works by Romila Thapar (1997, 2002), Upinder Singh (2008), A. L. Basham (1962), Percy Brown (1959), and

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Benjamin Rowland (1977), along with recent research such as Kumar (2020). A thematic approach has been used to organize the study into key areas, including historical background, major architectural forms, stylistic features, and religious influences. The research also incorporates interpretative analysis to understand how art and architecture functioned as instruments of political authority, religious expression, and cultural integration during the Mauryan period.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study aims to examine the development, characteristics, and significance of art and architecture during the Mauryan period within its historical and cultural framework. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

I. **To analyse the historical context** of the Mauryan Empire and its role in shaping artistic and architectural developments under rulers such as Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka.
II. **To identify and examine the major forms** of Mauryan art and architecture, including pillars, stupas, rock-cut caves, and urban structures.
III. **To evaluate the stylistic features and technical advancements** that distinguish Mauryan artistic production, such as stone polishing, monumentality, and symbolic representation.
IV. **To explore the religious and cultural influences**—particularly Buddhism and the concept of *Dhamma*—on artistic expression during the Mauryan period.
V. **To assess the role of state patronage** in promoting art and architecture as tools of political communication and social integration.
VI. **To investigate the interaction between indigenous traditions and foreign influences**, especially Achaemenid Persian and Hellenistic elements, in shaping Mauryan art.
VII. **To examine the decline and legacy** of Mauryan art and architecture and its impact on subsequent developments in Indian art history.

These objectives collectively guide the study in providing a comprehensive understanding of Mauryan art and architecture as a significant milestone in the cultural history of ancient India.

Historical Background and Socio-Political Context

The rise of the Mauryan Empire in the late 4th century BCE marked a decisive shift in the political and cultural landscape of ancient India. Emerging in the aftermath of the Alexander's invasion of India, the empire consolidated diverse regions under a centralized administrative framework. Chandragupta Maurya, with the guidance of Chanakya, established a powerful state that laid the foundation for political stability, economic prosperity, and cultural integration. The Mauryan administration, as described in the Arthashastra, emphasized efficient governance, urban planning, taxation, and state control over resources. This strong bureaucratic system enabled the mobilization of labor and materials necessary for large-scale architectural projects. Urban centers such as Pataliputra became hubs of political power and artistic activity, featuring palatial complexes, fortified structures, and planned layouts that reflected both indigenous traditions and external influences. A significant turning point in the socio-political and cultural trajectory of the Mauryan Empire occurred during the reign of Ashoka following the Kalinga War. The immense human suffering caused by the war led Ashoka to adopt Buddhism and promote the ethical doctrine of *Dhamma*. This transformation had profound implications for artistic and architectural production, as state-sponsored projects increasingly reflected moral, religious, and didactic concerns. Ashoka's patronage resulted in the construction of stupas, monasteries, and pillars inscribed with edicts that communicated his policies and moral teachings to a diverse population. These inscriptions, often written in Prakrit and engraved in Brahmi script, represent one of the earliest uses of writing as a tool of governance and public communication in South Asia. The integration of art, architecture, and ideology during this period underscores the role of material culture in reinforcing imperial authority and shaping collective identity. Furthermore, the Mauryan period witnessed increased interaction with foreign cultures, particularly the Achaemenid Persian and Hellenistic worlds. These interactions influenced artistic techniques, including stone carving, column construction, and decorative motifs. The synthesis of indigenous and external elements gave rise to a distinctive Mauryan aesthetic that set the stage for subsequent developments in Indian art and architecture.

Major Forms of Mauryan Art and Architecture

Table 1: Major Forms of Mauryan Art and Architecture

Type of Structure	Key Features	Materials Used	Purpose / Function	Example
Ashokan Pillars	Monolithic, polished surface, animal capitals	Sandstone	Political authority, propagation of Dhamma	Sarnath Lion Capital
Stupas	Hemispherical dome (anda), harmika, chhatras	Brick, stone	Religious (relic worship, meditation)	Sanchi Stupa
Rock-Cut Caves	Highly polished interiors, carved from solid rock	Granite	Religious (Ajivika, Buddhist use)	Barabar Caves
Palace Architecture	Pillared halls, wooden + stone structures	Wood and stone	Administrative and royal residence	Pataliputra Palace
Urban Architecture	Planned cities, drainage, fortifications	Wood, mud, brick	Civic planning and governance	Pataliputra City

Source: Adapted from Basham (1962), Brown (1959), Rowland (1977), Singh (2008), and Thapar(2002).

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1. Ashokan Pillars

One of the most significant achievements of Mauryan art is the construction of monolithic pillars during the reign of Ashoka **(Rowland, 1977).** These pillars, carved from single blocks of sandstone, exhibit a high degree of technical precision and aesthetic refinement. Typically rising to heights of 30–40 feet, they consist of a smooth, tapering shaft surmounted by intricately sculpted capitals. The capitals often feature animal figures such as lions, bulls, elephants, and horses, rendered with remarkable naturalism and symbolic meaning. The Lion Capital at Sarnath is the most renowned example, representing power, authority, and the universal spread of *Dhamma*. A defining feature of these pillars is the mirror-like polish, known as Mauryan polish, which gives the stone a metallic sheen. Inscriptions engraved on these pillars, known as the Ashokan Edicts, were written in Prakrit using Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts. These edicts served as instruments of governance, communicating ethical guidelines and administrative policies to the public.

2. Stupa Architecture

Stupas emerged as a central form of religious architecture during the Mauryan period, closely associated with the spread of Buddhism. Under the patronage of Ashoka, numerous stupas were constructed across the empire to enshrine relics of the Buddha and commemorate significant events. The Sanchi Stupa represents one of the earliest and most important examples, although its present elaborate features were added in later periods. The original Mauryan stupa was relatively simple in design, consisting of a hemispherical dome (*anda*), a square railing (*harmika*), and a central mast (*yasti*) topped with umbrellas (*chhatras*). Stupas functioned as sacred spaces for meditation, ritual circumambulation (*pradakshina*), and pilgrimage. Their architectural form symbolized the cosmos and the path to enlightenment, reflecting the spiritual and philosophical foundations of Buddhism.

3. Rock-Cut Architecture

The Mauryan period marks the earliest known phase of rock-cut architecture in India. The caves at Barabar Hills, excavated during the reigns of Ashoka and Dasharatha Maurya, are prime examples of this architectural innovation. These caves were primarily dedicated to the Ajivika sect and are notable for their highly polished granite interiors, which create a smooth, reflective surface. The precision with which these hard rock surfaces were carved demonstrates advanced technical skills. The Lomas Rishi cave is particularly significant for its façade, which imitates wooden architectural forms, including a horseshoe-shaped arch. This feature indicates a transitional phase from timber-based construction to permanent stone architecture. The Mauryan rock-cut caves laid the foundation for later developments in Indian cave architecture, influencing sites such as Ajanta and Ellora.

4. Palace and Urban Architecture

Mauryan urban and palace architecture, though largely lost due to the use of perishable materials like wood, is known through archaeological excavations and historical accounts. The capital city, Pataliputra, was described by Megasthenes as a विशाल and well-planned metropolis, featuring fortified walls, gates, and a complex administrative layout. Excavations at Kumhrar have revealed the remains of a large pillared hall, often identified with the Mauryan palace. The structure suggests the use of wooden pillars combined with stone bases, reflecting a hybrid architectural style. Mauryan urban planning included sophisticated drainage systems, road networks, and organized residential and administrative zones. The influence of Achaemenid Persian architecture is evident in the use of columned halls and grand spatial layouts. Despite the limited survival of physical remains, these structures highlight the administrative efficiency and cultural sophistication of the Mauryan state.

Stylistic Features and Artistic Characteristics

Mauryan art and architecture are distinguished by a number of defining stylistic features that reflect both technical excellence and ideological depth. These characteristics collectively illustrate the sophistication of artistic production during the Mauryan period:

1. **High Polish and Technical Mastery:** One of the most remarkable features is the use of highly polished stone, often termed "Mauryan polish," visible in monuments associated with Ashoka and sites like Barabar Hills. This mirror-like finish demonstrates advanced craftsmanship and knowledge of stone-working techniques.
2. **Monumentality and Simplicity:** Mauryan structures emphasize grandeur combined with simplicity. Architectural forms such as pillars and stupas are monumental yet minimally ornamented, focusing on proportion, balance, and clarity rather than intricate decoration.
3. **Symbolism and Iconography:** Symbolic motifs are central to Mauryan art. Animals like lions, elephants, bulls, and horses convey political and spiritual meanings. The lion capital at Sarnath, for example, represents authority and the spread of *Dhamma*, while symbols such as the *chakra* and lotus embody philosophical and religious concepts.
4. **Synthesis of Indigenous and Foreign Influences:** Mauryan art reflects a fusion of local traditions with external influences, particularly from the Achaemenid Persian world, introduced after Alexander's invasion of India. Elements such as bell-shaped capitals and column designs were adapted into an Indian context, creating a unique artistic style.
5. **Coexistence of Elite and Folk Traditions:** Alongside imperial art, smaller-scale works such as terracotta figurines and sculptures like the Didarganj Yakshi highlight the persistence of popular artistic traditions. This indicates that Mauryan art was not limited to state-sponsored projects but also included regional and vernacular expressions.

These features collectively demonstrate that Mauryan art and architecture were not only technically advanced but also deeply embedded in the socio-political and religious fabric of the time.

Religious and Cultural Influences

Art and architecture during the Mauryan period were deeply influenced by religious ideologies and cultural interactions, particularly under the patronage of Ashoka. These influences

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can be understood through the following key points:

1. **Buddhist Influence and State Patronage**

The most significant impact on Mauryan art came from Buddhism, especially after Ashoka's transformation following the Kalinga War. The construction of stupas, pillars, and monasteries reflected the emperor's commitment to spreading *Dhamma*. These structures served both religious and political purposes, promoting ethical values such as non-violence, compassion, and moral discipline across the empire.

2. **Symbolism of Religious Philosophy**

Mauryan art incorporated strong symbolic elements derived from Buddhist teachings. Architectural forms like stupas represented cosmic and spiritual concepts, while inscriptions on pillars conveyed moral guidance. Symbols such as the *chakra* (wheel of law) and lotus were used to express philosophical ideas related to life, purity, and enlightenment.

3. **Religious Pluralism**

Despite the prominence of Buddhism, the Mauryan Empire supported multiple religious traditions, including Jainism and the Ajivika sect. The rock-cut caves at Barabar Hills, dedicated to the Ajivikas, demonstrate this inclusivity. Such diversity enriched artistic expression and encouraged the coexistence of different cultural traditions.

4. **Cultural Exchange and Foreign Influence**

Interaction with external cultures, particularly the Hellenistic and Achaemenid Persian worlds, contributed to the development of Mauryan art. These influences introduced new techniques and stylistic elements, which were adapted into the Indian context, resulting in a unique blend of indigenous and foreign artistic traditions.

5. **Art as a Tool of Political and Social Integration:**

Mauryan rulers used art and architecture as instruments to reinforce imperial authority and social cohesion. Monuments such as pillars and stupas were strategically placed across the empire to communicate state ideology and unify diverse populations. The use of inscriptions in local languages ensured that these messages were accessible to the public.

Together, these factors highlight how religion and culture were not separate from artistic production but were central to shaping the form, function, and meaning of Mauryan art and architecture.

Decline and Legacy of Mauryan Art and Architecture

The decline of Mauryan art and architecture is closely linked to the disintegration of the Mauryan Empire after the death of Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE. The weakening of centralized authority led to reduced state patronage, which had previously been the driving force behind large-scale architectural and artistic projects. Successors of Ashoka, including Dasharatha Maurya, continued some level of patronage, but the scale and ambition of artistic production gradually diminished.

1. **Political Fragmentation and Decline of Patronage**

The collapse of imperial unity resulted in the emergence of regional kingdoms, which lacked the resources and administrative capacity of the Mauryan state. As a result, monumental constructions such as pillars and large stupas became less frequent, marking a shift in artistic activity from centralized to regional levels.

2. **Transition in Artistic Styles**

Following the Mauryan period, artistic styles evolved under subsequent dynasties such as the Shungas and Satavahanas. These periods witnessed increased ornamentation and narrative detail, especially in stupa architecture. For instance, sites like Sanchi Stupa were further developed with intricate carvings and gateways, indicating a departure from the simplicity of Mauryan forms.

3. **Decline of Mauryan Polish and Techniques**

The highly refined polishing technique characteristic of Mauryan stonework gradually disappeared in later periods. This suggests either the loss of specialized skills or a shift in aesthetic preferences toward more decorative and less polished surfaces.

Despite its decline, the legacy of Mauryan art and architecture remained profound and enduring:

- **Foundation of Indian Monumental Architecture**

The Mauryan period laid the groundwork for subsequent developments in Indian architecture, particularly in the construction of stupas, pillars, and rock-cut caves. These forms continued to evolve in later periods, influencing major architectural traditions across the subcontinent.

- **Influence on Buddhist Art and Architecture**

Mauryan patronage played a crucial role in establishing Buddhism as a major cultural and artistic force. The architectural forms and symbolic vocabulary developed during this period were adopted and expanded in regions beyond India, including Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

- **Integration of Art and State Ideology**

The use of art as a medium for political communication, especially through inscriptions and public monuments, set an important precedent in Indian history. This integration of governance and artistic expression influenced later rulers and empires.

- **Cultural and National Significance**

Elements of Mauryan art continue to hold symbolic importance in modern India. The Lion Capital of Sarnath, for example, has been adopted as the national emblem, reflecting the enduring legacy of Mauryan artistic achievements.

CONCLUSION

Mauryan art and architecture represent a seminal phase in the evolution of Indian artistic traditions, characterized by innovation, state patronage, and ideological expression. Emerging under the centralized authority of rulers such as Chandragupta Maurya and reaching its zenith during the reign of Ashoka, this period witnessed the transition from ephemeral materials to durable stone construction, setting new standards in craftsmanship and monumentality. The architectural forms developed during this era—pillars, stupas, and rock-cut caves—were not merely structural achievements but also powerful vehicles of political authority and religious communication. The integration of Buddhist principles, particularly through Ashoka's propagation of *Dhamma*, transformed art into a medium for ethical instruction and social cohesion. At the same time, the coexistence of multiple religious traditions and the assimilation of foreign influences contributed to a rich and diverse cultural landscape. Stylistically, Mauryan art is distinguished by its polished surfaces, symbolic motifs, and balanced simplicity. These features, combined with

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technological advancements and administrative support, enabled the creation of works that were both aesthetically refined and functionally significant. Although the decline of the Mauryan Empire led to a reduction in large-scale artistic production, its legacy endured in subsequent artistic developments and continues to influence Indian cultural identity. In essence, Mauryan art and architecture laid the foundation for the classical traditions of Indian art, establishing a model of artistic expression that harmonized political power, religious philosophy, and cultural synthesis.

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