AJANTA

PAINTINGS

TWENTY PLATES IN COLOUR

LALIT KALA AKADAMI

ONAL ACADEMY OF ART, NEW DELHI

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LALIT KALA AKADAMI
NEW DELHI
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INTRODUCTION

AT a quiet secluded spot, at the edge of the Deccan plateau and on the border of Khandesh, in an atmosphere which is at once peaceful and serene and vibrant with the vitality of nature, there are 29 rock cut Buddhist temples and monasteries, forming a majestic amphitheatre. They are at a distance of about four miles from a village, Ajanta, and have invested that name with a magic which has cast a growing spell on all those who appreciate art.

These shrines were built over a period of about 700 years, the earliest probably as early as over 2000 years ago. And then for centuries they remained forgotten and neglected, till some officers of the Madras Army stumbled upon them by chance in 1819. Various attempts by individuals were then made from time to time to copy some of the wall paintings which had withstood the ravages of time and ignorance of man. The Government of the Hyderabad State then established a Department of Archaeology and assumed responsibility for looking after this precious heritage. After the accession of the Hyderabad State to the Union of India, that responsibility has passed on to the Government of India, for these cave shrines of Ajanta have been declared by Parliament to be monuments of national importance.

The importance of Ajanta in the history of Indian art is such that any attempt to state it in precise terms would appear exaggerated and yet be inadequate. Ajanta has enthralled every art critic who has seen it and set him to a desperate search for words in which to convey his impressions. The technical excellence of the artists of Ajanta and their extraordinary powers of artistic expression, combined with their intense love of nature and spiritual devotion, have left in the *chaityas* and *viharas* of Ajanta a record of human endeavour which can only be described as a supreme inspiration for man.

In the first flush of enthusiasm there was a tendency to be overwhelmed rather than be inspired by the art of Ajanta. This tendency to imitate was unfortunate inasmuch as it fostered the tendency to look back rather than to look ahead; but it was also understandable, because the art of Ajanta, while it breathed the spirit and expressed the soul of that period, was a thousand years ahead of its time. In its study of nature, in the perfection of lines, forms, colours, composition and perspective, and in its approach and concepts, it is still a beacon for the most advanced artists of modern times. "It is," as Laurence Binyon said, "a vision of the living world that the artists of Ajanta present; the teeming earth, the springing plants, the birds, the deer, the elephants; crimson-pillared pavilions and porticos; gateways and roofs of cities; and among all these the life of men and women and children, supple limbed, gracious in gesture, free moving, playful or pensive in mood; all earthly life in its laughter and its grief: but always emerging from it a life of the spirit prevails, the spirit that contemplates and fills with compassion."

The architecture and sculpture of Ajanta are also of the highest standard. Cave XIX, for instance, is one of the most perfect specimens of Buddhist Art. In sculpture, there are numerous beautiful specimens of arabesques, patterns, birds and animals, apart from human figures, such as Padmapani (Cave IV) and the Naga figures in Cave XIX and at the entrance of Cave XVI. It is a pity that the architecture and sculpture of Ajanta have not received the attention they undoubtedly deserve, but there can also be no gainsaying the fact that it is the wall paintings of Ajanta which are their chief glory. For instance, the Mother and Child is an unforgettable vision, of which Laurence Binyon has said that there is "no picture anywhere more profoundly impressive in grandeur and in tenderness". Of the Dying Princess, Griffiths says that it is "unsurpassed in the history of Art, for pathos and sentiment and the unmistakable way of telling its story". And there are scores of other pictures which have evoked exclamations of superlative praise and still defy description. Of the tenderness, charm, expressiveness and vigour of the pictures reproduced in this album, it is unnecessary to say anything, for the reader can see for himself what man, inspired by and devoted to an ideal, can achieve. It may, however, be mentioned that, instead of selecting only the best known paintings, an endeavour has been made to give a representative selection which will present, as far as possible, a comprehensive picture of the range and quality of the Ajanta paintings.

There have been numerous books, brochures and albums containing reproductions of the wall paintings of Ajanta. Not all reproductions are of a sufficiently good quality, and those which are, notably the compilations of Griffiths and Yazdani, are too expensive for the general public. There was need, therefore, of a popular album which would both be of a satisfactory standard and within the reach of the general public. The Department of Archaeology of the Government of India and the Lalit Kala Akadami decided to make a contribution towards fulfilling that need, and this album of a few specimens from the most superb single collection of Buddhist Art is their joint offering on the occasion of the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's Parinirvana.

New Delhi
November 8, 1956.

ASHFAQUE HUSAIN



PLATE I

PART OF THE CEILING AND THE COLUMNS OF THE FRONT CORRIDOR

CAVE 17



PLATE II

DECORATION ON THE CEILING OF THE VESTIBULE

CAVE 1



PLATE III

DECORATION ON THE CEILING

CAVE 2



PLATE IV

BODHISATTVA PADMAPĀṆI

CAVE 1



PLATE V

A BODHISATTVA

CAVE 1



PLATE VI

A FLYING FIGURE

CAVE 16



PLATE VII

AN APSARA (divine danseuse)

CAVE 17

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PLATE VIII

CAVE 1

TWO DARK LADIES



PLATE IX

A TOILET-SCENE

CAVE 17



PLATE X

CAVE 17

THE SEVEN MORTAL BUDDHAS



PLATE XI

CAVE 17

THE CONGREGATION LISTENING TO BUDDHA'S DISCOURSE



PLATE XII

A PALACE-SCENE (part of the story of the subjugation of the furious elephant)

CAVE 17



PLATE XIII

A ROYAL PROCESSION (part of the Siṁhala Avadāna) CAVE 17



PLATE XIV

CAVE 17

A PALACE-SCENE (probably part of the Vessantara Jātaka)



PLATE XV

CAVE 1

A PRINCE LEAVING HIS PALACE (part of the Mahājanaka Jātaka)

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PLATE XVI

CAVE 1

LUSTRATION OF A PRINCE (probably part of the Mahājanaka Jātaka)



PLATE XVII

CAVE 1

A PALACE-SCENE (part of the Mahājanaka Jātaka)



PLATE XVIII

CAVE 1

A PRINCE LISTENING TO THE DISCOURSE OF A HERMIT (part of the Mahājanaka Jātaka)



PLATE XIX

CAVE 1

PRINCE AND PRINCESS IN CONVERSATION (a part of Mahājanaka Jātaka)

PLATE XX

CAVE 1

A HAPPY PAIR

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