

## **Ancient Indian Art – A formal analysis**

**Dr. Uma Chakraborty**

### **ABSTRACT**

*Distinctive artistic activity in ancient India began with Harappan miniature art pieces. An art, monumental in conception and precise in execution is noticed in the Mauryan period. The native style of simplicity and folk appeal is best represented in the narrative Sunga art which forms a treasure house of fables, visually represented. The Kushana sculptures fostered a mixed culture with Graeco-Roman affiliation. The sensuous sculptural art that bloomed at Amaravati and Nagarjunikonda display a mastery in detailed ornamentation. The human figure, the pivot of Gupta sculpture expressed a characteristically refined taste and charm. The synthesis culminated in the Pala-Sena period is a fusion of classical mannerism with the indigenous style of Bengal. The magnificent open air bas-relief sculpted out of rock at Mahabalipuram glorifies Pallava art. Casting of bronzes under the imperial Cholas was an age of refinement of Dravidian art. This innovation and creativity exerted lasting influence on the art movement that glorify our cultural past.*

**Key words :** Art, sculpture, relief, terracotta, bronze,

### **Introduction**

Art forms are expression of people belonging to different cultural and social groups. History of Indian art begins with the pre-historic cave paintings. It is considered as an evidence of a creative explosion when the minds of ancient humans became fully developed. Generally speaking Indian art is an anonymous art, as the sculptor or the artist never sought to glorify himself. He always gave his best as a humble offering to his patron, the king or exercised his imaginative impulse through his creations.

*Associate Professor in History, Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College, Kolkata*

### **Harappan Art**

The major era in the art history of India begins with the Bronze Age culture of Harappa. The Harappan culture blossomed as the first urban civilization of ancient India. Each of its facets was unique in artistic creativity and this developed a sculptural standard of exquisite beauty.

Terracotta, a functional art is the first creative expression of human civilization. The word terracotta is derived from the Latin word “terra cotta” which means “baked earth”. It refers to the primeval plastic material i.e. natural clay fired at low temperature. Terracotta has a characteristic rusty mud colour because of the presence of ferrous compounds in clay. The making of terracotta hardly involved any complex technical know-how or heavy financial involvement. They appeared in diverse form with simplicity of expression.

Stella Kramrisch, a pioneering interpreter of Indian art classified the terracotta objects into “timeless” and “time-bound” variety. The timeless variety of terracottas are made by hand without using a mould. The clay is shaped by rounding off or flattening, by drawing into points and pinching, sometimes by incising lines and fixing pellets of clay in ‘applique method’. The timeless terracotta Mother Goddess from the Harappan sites are impressive examples of realism. They are represented as the progenitor of life and thus the worship of the Mother was considered paramount. She represented the power of generation, regeneration and the cycle of life. She was the symbol of fertility and began to be associated with arable land and thus worshipped by the farmers and the barren women who longed to give birth to a child. These Mother Goddess figurines from Harappan sites closely resemble the artistic creations of the Aegean world and those of the Hittites, Philistines and Phrygians.

Harappan seals, the tiny masterpieces of glyptic art, prove that the Harappans were masters in miniature art. They are very small in size but the carvings on it are exquisite and precise exhibiting supreme sense of designing. Most of them were made of steatite and a few in terracotta and other medium. The seals were used generally for commercial purposes but a few were also carried as amulets.

By far the greatest numbers of the Harappan seals depict figures of bulls, either zebu or the ox with its heavy dewlap and wide curving horns. Although the iconography of the zebu motif cannot be properly identified, it appears likely that the popular bovine emblem is related

to the cult of the bull, which in turn led to 'Nandi' and the worship of Shiva.

One of the most evocative seals from Mohenjodaro, depicts a deity with horned headdress and bangles on both arms, standing in a pipal (sacred fig) tree and looking down on a kneeling worshiper with hands raised in respectful salutation, prayer or worship. A human head rests on a small stool and giant ram and seven figures in procession complete the narrative. .

The 'contest' motif is one of the most convincing and widely accepted parallels between Harappan and Near Eastern glyptic art. A considerable number of Harappan seals depict a manly hero, each hand grasping a tiger by the throat. In Mesopotamian art, the fight with lions or bulls is the most popular motif and this depiction recalls the tale of the 'The Epic of Gilgamesh'.



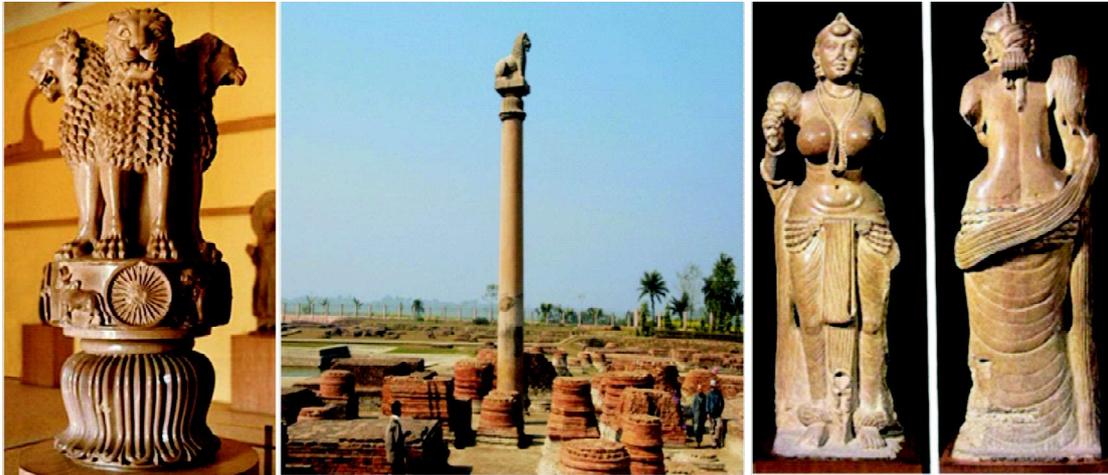
A remarkable seal from Mohenjodaro with buffalo-horned figure is identified by Sir John Marshall as Shiva in his form as Pashupati, lord of animals. The figure of Shiva represented on the seal is ithyphallic. He has been portrayed as seated cross-legged, in Yogic 'padmasana'. The wide arms of the image pointing towards the earth, the Yogic nature of the wide-lapped stance and the curved horns, transmit power and establish equilibrium. Natural enemies, wild and virile animals, buffalo, leaping tiger, rhinoceros and elephant all amicably surround the figure. The un-deciphered script is arranged horizontally in the space above the headdress.

Sculpture is, by far, the most expressive of plastic arts. It can be classified as sculptures in round with dimension and sculptures in relief where the sculpted elements remain attached to a solid background of the same material. Reliefs are traditionally classified into bas-relief and alto-relief according to how high the figures project from the background. Bas-relief is a technique in which the figural projection from the given plane or surface or background is

slight and very delicate and alto-relief is in which the figural projection from the background surface is significant and notable.

Seated male sculpture of white, low fired steatite, interpreted as a priest from Mohenjodaro (17.5 cm height, 11 cm width) is a remarkable piece of art. The upper lip of the figure is shaved and a short combed beard frames the face. He wears a plain woven fillet or ribbon headband with circular inlay ornament on the forehead and similar but smaller ornament on the right upper arm. The two ends of the fillet fall along the back. The hair is carefully combed towards the back of the head. Two holes beneath the highly stylized ears suggest that a necklace or other head ornament was attached to the sculpture. The left shoulder is covered with a shawl decorated with trefoil designs that recalls the sculptures from Sumerian world. Elongated eyes are deeply incised and half closed as in a meditative concentration. A slight touch of Greek style of statues can be seen overall.

A bronze statuette 10.5 cm. (4.1 inches) high, hailing from Mohenjodaro in a standing position, was named 'Dancing Girl' with an assumption of her profession. This bronze art works found at Mohenjodaro show more flexible features when compared to other formal poses. The girl is naked, wears a number of bangles and a necklace and is shown in a natural standing position with one hand on her hip. She wears a cowry shell necklace with three big pendants and her long hair styled in a big bun rests on her shoulder. This statue reflects the



aesthetics of a female body as conceptualized during that historical period. Lost-wax casting,

a sculpting technique used here is an elaborate process.

### **Mauryan Art**

After the Harappan Culture there is a surprising absence of art of any great degree of sophistication. As time passed the Mauryan period heralded a great land-mark in the history of Indian art. This art is individualistic in its essential character and ideology. Emperor Ashoka wanted to bring India into the orbit of international culture, so created an art different in aesthetic vision and tradition. The free standing isolated monolithic pillars about fifty feet high and weighed about fifty tones set up by him are perhaps the finest specimens of the remains of the Mauryan art. They represent a triumph of engineering, architecture and sculpture. Huge and entire pieces of fine grained sand-stones from Chunar were chiselled into the shape of these pillars. The wonderful life-like figures of the four lions standing back to back and the smaller graceful and stately figures of animals in relief on the abacus, all indicate a highly advanced form of art and their remarkable beauty, majesty and vigour.

The life size animal sculpture that crowns the Ashokan pillars has evoked admiration of the art critics. They are unique, monumental in conception and design and fine and precise in execution. The Basarh-Bakhira lion evidently marks the earliest stage. It is clumsy in appearance and to some extent crude in execution. The refinement and a feeling for linear rhythm is noticed in the Rampurva bull, lion from Lauriya Nandangarh and the Sarnath quadripartite. The manes of the lions are highly stylized and locks are treated in separate volumes. The facial expression is fanciful and the treatment of the veins and muscles exhibit power and authority. The Sarnath capital, our national emblem is an excellent example of ancient sculpture that successfully combines realistic modeling with ideal dignity and is finished in every detail with perfect accuracy.

The animal figures depicted in Ashokan art are why and how far Buddhist is a matter of controversy. It is stated that after the tremendous blood-shed in the Kalinga war Ashoka became pacified and followed the path of non-violence as indicated by Lord Buddha. Thus the animals crowning the columns are somehow connected to Buddhism. The lion traditionally regarded as the king of the forest and the most powerful and majestic of all animals, has a specific meaning in the early Buddhist tradition. The Buddha was Sakya-simha, the lion of the tribe of the Sakyas. The Bodhisattva is born as a white elephant and also the Buddha is

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a tamer of elephants. The Buddha was born in the zodiac sign of a bull. The horse which apart from its role in the legend of the Great Renunciation, was, along with the elephant, regarded as another important symbol of royalty, of universal monarch, in both temporal and spiritual sense. The deer symbolizes the Masters Great Enlightenment at the Deer park of Sarnath. Therefore, these animals were each invested with a strong symbolical meaning in early Buddhist tradition.

The most important functions of the Mauryan art was to impress and overawe the populace with the power and majesty of its rulers. But it lacked deeper roots in the collective social will, taste and preference. So the Mauryan Court art, with all its dignified bearing, monumental appearance and civilized quality, forms but a short and isolated chapter in the history of Indian art. Like the columns and the animal figures themselves, Mauryan Court art stands aloof and apart.

One finest sculpture in round from Mauryan period is the *Chauri* (fly whisk) bearer or the Didarganj *Yakshi* from Patna. This highly polished voluptuous, tall and well-proportioned free standing stone sculpture in round, shows sophistication in the treatment with round muscular



body, round face with fleshy cheeks and sharp eyes, nose and lips. The folds of muscles are accurately defined. Every fold of the garment wrapping the legs are shown with protruding lines which creates a transparent effect. Hanging beaded necklace and heavy ornaments adorn the feet. Heaviness in the torso is depicted by heavy breasts. The hair tied in a knot at the back is elegantly portrayed.

During the Mauryan period terracotta art made some rapid strides and undergone a process of evolution. The rather primitive types of the earlier period are replaced by new norms

both in expression and execution. Terracotta figurines show a very different delineation of the body as compared to the sculptures. Terracotta figures bearing trends of the West are not influenced by the pillar capitals bearing imperial style. A Yaksha modelled in the round from Tamluk, now in the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, University of Calcutta is of heavy dimension and a reminiscent of its monumental counterparts from Patna, Parkham and Paway. In spite of the rigidly frontal treatment the figure is more lively, vivacious and soft in its rounded plasticity.

### **Sunga Art**

Indian art was not meant to cater to the elite class only. To reach to a large audience who were not literate the narrative art appeared in the Sunga period. The art of the Buddhist stupa at Bharhut, now partially preserved in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, forms a treasure house of fables, visually represented. It depicts Jataka stories of Buddha's previous birth and scenes from the Master's life. Buddha is never represented in human form in Buddhist art before the Christian era, as his spirituality was considered too abstract for the purpose. His presence in early Indian art and his spiritual journey, renunciation, meditation, and wisdom, are vividly portrayed in this art symbolically. In a medallion the gift of the Jetavana Park by Anatha Pindaka, covering the ground with golden coins before it was presented by the merchant prince, is most graphically represented in the Bharhut railings. Basically emphasis was given on elaboration of the flat surface and of frontality as distinct from 'perspective' presentation.

The native style, distinguished by its simplicity and folk appeal is best represented in the free standing flat smooth figures of Yakshas and Yakshinis that cling along the pillars, on the gate and railings of Bharhut stupa. The figure of Chulakoka Devata is a notable specimen of Sunga art representing its indigenous character and folk quality. Here no attempt is made towards facial expression, the body is without energy. She is a tree goddess and stands gracefully on an elephant with her arms and one leg entwined around a flowering tree. The profuse jewellery and the mode of wearing the under garment and the head-dress demonstrate the feminine fashion of the period.

In Sanchi the figures awake into a new life and reality. They are active and energetic. The

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figures in Bharhut stand with joined hands but in Sanchi importance was given to movement and they do not stand clumsily with their weight on both the feet, but cross the legs gracefully. Another good example of Sunga art of the second century BCE is the jovial figures, the dwarfish Yaksha from the Pithalkhora caves in Central India, carrying a bowl of abundance



on his head. The care-free broad smile on his face and his round belly indicate his satisfaction. The two amulets strung on his necklace ward off evil spirits from his devotees.

The Sunga period is an important phase in the evolution of the history of the terracotta art also. These terracottas are of fine fabric and are uniformly baked light red or orange though some of them have a red slip. The dignity of Maurya vanishes and a new ideology and appreciation of physical charm was introduced. An important change was noticed in the technique of production. The use of single mould for producing heads which are joined to the bodies by hand was further developed by the use of a mould for the entire figure. This advancement produced fine pieces displaying refined and sensitive modelling. The experienced artists mastered the regulation of contours and the linear rhythm became disciplined. Stylistically Sunga terracottas produced refined slender bodies with pose of elegant ease, graceful relaxation and care-free languor. These qualities exemplified aristocracy and sophistication of the people.

The Sunga terracottas drew inspiration from the Brahmanical tales and Buddhist Jataka stories and manifested them with an exotic appeal. The Sunga figurines are folk in character. The dress, costumes, coiffures and jewellery that are found on the Sunga terracotta specimens are also noticed on the stone reliefs of Bharhut, Sanchi and Bodhgaya.

The finest specimen of this period is a terracotta female figurine (ht. 21 cm. Ashmolean

Museum, Oxford) from Tamluk (ancient Tamralipta, Bengal). Variouslly identified as Apsara Panchachuda Yakshi of the epic lore or Maya of Asvaghosha's Saundarananda Kavya. She has been portrayed as a young lady with slightly plumped face and a slender body, but noticeably lavishly ornamented (even her costume is covered with



ornaments).She wears an extremely elaborate headdress and her hair is probably enclosed in a close fitting bonnet with four rows of beads at the ridge which terminated in two floral tassels.

### **Kushana Art**

The Kushana rule in the North gave a new mode of expression to the creative genius of the contemporary artists. This period matches with the blossoming of two major schools of Buddhist sculptures, those of Mathura (Uttar Pradesh, India) and Gandhara (Northwest Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan). The two schools are associated with the earliest anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha. They fostered a mixed culture which is best illustrated by the variety of deities with Greco-Roman affiliation. The style of Kushana artworks is stiff, hieratic and frontal. It is the fusion of elements from Classical, Iranian, Central Asian, and Indian origin expressed into organic, heterogeneous productions that defines best the term 'Kushana art'.

The creative epoch of the Gandhara, Graeco-Buddhist or Graeco-Roman School flourished during the Kushana dynasty under the patronage of Kanishka. The Gandhara region had long been a crossroads of cultural influences and was profoundly influenced by Greek methodologies. The Gandhara school drew upon the anthropomorphic traditions of Roman religion and represented the Buddha with a youthful Apollo-like face, robed in the fashion

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of a Roman Toga and hairs arranged in wavy curls. For representing the Indian Buddhist themes the technique applied is essentially Hellenistic tempered by Iranian and Scythian influences. The figures of Buddha were more spiritual and carved mainly in grey and bluish-grey colour and finest detailing. Some divine figures here often acquire humanistic details with great attention to accuracy of physical details. The artists' added moustache, turban or ornaments to these deities according to the current local taste.

The Mathura School of Art was entirely influenced by Indianism. As far as the characteristics



of Buddhist art is concerned, this school is essentially known for images carved on the railings of stupas and for stele statues representing divinities of the Buddhist pantheon (Buddha, Bodhisattva, and tutelary divinities) sculpted in the mottled red sandstone found in the nearby quarries of Siki. The figures of the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas are represented as happy and fleshy and are less spiritual.

As for formal features of Mathura images, sculptures found on the sites of Katra, Jamalpur, Kankali Tila, and Palikhera, to name but a few, are characterized by their generous proportions, broad shoulders, large chest, and round head with full-cheeks and fleshy smiling mouth. These largely Buddhist artworks are remarkable for the fine pathos of the faces, their downturned gazes, delicate moustaches. Though shaped in stone, their robes and

ornaments fall gently. The Mathura Bacchanalian scenes showing drunken women supported by her companions also deserve mention. There is a great lightness to these figures, and a sense of quiet, individual poise.

The term 'dynastic arts', coined by John Rosenfield refers to portraits of Kushana rulers. The Kushana rulers have retained the fashion of their Central Asian nomadic ancestors: the heavy caftans, the felt boots, the hooded cap, and the golden bracteates sewn on tunics. This fashion is later replaced by the scale armour of the military elite. Despite the static frontal poses, the figures are treated with realistic features. The faces are expressive and display the characteristics of age, high status, and ethnicity. The finest example of this art is seen in the life-size statue of Kushana Emperor Kanishka. The headless body of the king is depicted in a frontal view with his feet spread apart. The King stands in royal posture with majestic dignity. He wears an elegant belted tunic and sword scabbard. His robes create an angular shape which is typical of the Kushana era. The images that display monumentality, rigidity, and frontality have been stylistically related to Parthian art from Dura Europos, Palmyra, and Hatra.

The third type of sculptural art that bloomed during this period was at Amaravati and



Nagarjunkonda in Andhra Pradesh. The themes were Buddha's life and Jatakas tales. The curly hairs of Buddha in white lime stone are a feature that is influenced by the Greeks. These sensuous sculptures display a mastery in detailed ornamentation and the elegance of figures are shown in a rare harmony. They unfold the cultural story of a glorious people. Numerous scenes of dance and music portrayed in reliefs bespeak the joy of life.

The terracottas of the Kushana period are varied in form and content. Stylistically, they fall into two distinct groups, one refined and the other crude and both of them have parallels in stone sculptures. The Kushana repertoire has a number of examples modelled in the round.

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They are smooth and sensuous. The use of two pieces of moulded parts joined together provides a three dimensional effect which marks an advance in the technique on that of the terracotta pieces of the earlier epochs. This elevated the art from the low and flat relief of the Maurya and Sunga idioms to the bold and high one of the Kushana phase. The warmth and depth of volumes of the terracottas of this epoch further accentuated the art traditions.

### **Gupta Art**

Assimilating the idiom of the Kushana age, the Gupta period ushered a brilliant epoch in the area of artistic creativity. The art of this age bears an evidence of an established idiom inspired by a mystic philosophy and transcendental thoughts that gained appreciation through the ages. Sculptures executed in stone in particular set the norm of plastic art and the terracottas of the period conformed to that norm. Artists of the Gupta culture epoch gave equal emphasis on secular and religious subjects. The Guptas were staunch followers of different Brahmanical cults and as a result iconography of different divinities was standardized and cult images began to appear.

The human figure is the pivot of Gupta sculpture. They express a characteristically refined taste and charm of the Gupta style. The soft and pliant human figures exhibit a free and easy movement. The Buddha figures from Sarnath and Mathura with their soft and pliant body prove to be infused with an inherent energy. The sculptural treatment here is more delicate. The facial features reveal supernatural and serene calmness. Resilient curves define the modelling and the physiognomical details vibrate a rhythm. The Gupta artists in order to emphasize the plastic subjects sensitively reduced all superfluities viz., elaborate drapery, ornamentation, coiffure etc. that conceal the physical beauty. The wet or transparent drapery (*magnamsuka*) became the convention which no doubt enhanced the grace of the figure. What emerged was purely natural, free from over-elaboration.

The terracotta art also received a fillip by the spurt of monumental constructions in a scale hitherto unknown in Indian art history. The Gupta artists made the back of the terracottas flat by means of a sharp tool or a bamboo strip. The use of a double mould is relatively few in number and either had a hollow within or is solid. They were often treated with a

deep red slip to cover up defects in surface treatment and also for making the surface of the figures smooth and glossy. The terracottas of Palasbadi-Saralpur hoard from Bengal inscribed in Gupta script of the last half of the seventh and eighth centuries CE show delicacy of the Gupta heritage. These labelled art materials is the first of its kind which probably made a comparatively initial stage of introduction of the Brahmanical epic in the region. The narrated stories here reflect an intimate connection with ethnic and local roots.

### **Pala-Sena Art**

The major dynasty after the Imperial Guptas was the Palas who came to power sometime in the middle of the eighth century. Pala-Sena art or Eastern Indian art, derives its origin from the late Gupta style. Not only the sculptural element but the basic features of the Pala School of Art were modified on the model of the Gupta style. The synthesis culminated here is a fusion of classical mannerism with the indigenous style of Bengal. This new style of art reflected the ideas of beauty, physical charm and sensuousness. They show over sensitive gestures and accurate linear composition. Most of the sculptures discovered in Bangladesh and West Bengal have been carved out of Rajmahal black basalt stone.

The female principle as creative energy is dominant in the Pala-Sena sculptures. Here the female figures are shown with heavy round breasts and bulging hips. The male figures are shown with a massive body, broad shoulder moderately lessen to a narrow waist that suggests their disciplined vigour and strength. This delicately carved images mostly in black stone give the impression of soft textured flesh and skin. Almost all the specimens are moulded in high relief. Some of them show a tendency for elongation of the body and of the limbs. The faces became pointed and expressed enjoyment. Dresses and ornaments became fabulous. The pointed stele (meant to be the throne carriage of the deity) became overcrowded with an abundance of figures and elaborate decoration. The over emphasis on perfection and surface details no doubt has minimized sense of plastic conception of the stone images that distinguished it from the rest of Indian specimens. By the sharp clear-cut features and smooth glossy finishing of the figures the Pala and Sena sculptures are characterized by a precision of execution unmatched by any other schools of Indian sculpture. These features of the stone images gives one impression that they are imitations of metal

work.

The home of the art of Pala-Sena dynasties is the modern provinces of Bihar and Bengal. The largest concentration of early Pala sculptures were found in situ at the basement wall of the famous Somapura Mahavihara at Paharpur (modern Bangladesh). They are crude in execution and reflect an indigenous strength. An image of Hari-Hara from Bardhaman, now in possession of the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, University of Calcutta is a praiseworthy example of Pala art idiom.

Towards the close of the tenth century CE, the first renaissance of the Bengal school of art appeared and are marked by complete assimilation of the different traits of local plastic art. A number of Brahmanical sculptures were produced. Female divinities of the Buddhist pantheon remarkably increased. Sculptures depicting peculiar tantric Buddhist images as Heruka, Marichi and Manjuvara appeared. Large size bronze sculptures of this period are also remarkable for execution and finish. The 11th century artists have made these lifeless figures come alive on stone. The bronze sculptures also flourished simultaneously in the 10th to 12th centuries.

Artists of this period also used the terracotta medium for depicting diverse subjects, religious as well as secular, and the terracotta plaques coming from the ateliers imaginably enhanced the beauty of the colossal structures of the once highly renowned Mahaviharas. The terracotta figures of this period also reveal a style of delineation emphasizing on an elongated form and a linear sensitivity. They are free from supple vigor and emotional content. They express a purely local diction surcharged with emotional sentiments.

Mahabalipuram or Mamallapuram is a historic city in Tamil Nadu. During the reign of the Pallava dynasty it became an important centre of art. The sculptures here are extraordinary creations remarkable for their striking naturalism. They cover one side of an entire hillside. Carved in the mid-seventh century, measuring approximately 30m (100ft) by 15m (45ft) is the magnificent open air bas-relief sculpted out of pink granite. It is alternatively known as Arjuna's Penance or Descent of the Ganges. Arjuna's Penance is a story from the Mahabharata of how Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers, performed severe austerities in order to obtain Shiva's weapon. The Descent of the Ganges depicts the sage Bhagiratha performing austerities in order to bring the Ganges down to earth. Here the heroic Arjuna

is a symbol of the rulers, and the Ganges is a symbol of their purifying power. The composition of the relief includes the main elements of the story on the left and scenes of the natural and celestial worlds on the right. A natural fissure on the rock that separates the two halves of the relief is depicted as a natural waterfall (the Ganges' descent). To the left, just above the shrine, Arjuna (or Bhagiratha) with arms upraised in a yoga posture stands on one leg. Behind him appears Shiva, holding a weapon and attended by ganas. To the right of the fissure, life-sized elephants with trunks swinging protect their young. Among other sculptures a family of life-size stone monkeys sitting beside them, nearby graze deer, a cow licking its calf is being milked, images jostle with super-human warrior heroes, bearded sages and meditating ascetics, floating an airborne cast of gods and goddesses, heavenly nymphs and tree spirits, and snake-hooded nagas and naginis are the marvelous examples of Pallava art. Nearby *mandapas*, particularly the Krishna mandapa, however, showcase scenes of pastoral life amid mythical figures. An exquisite bas-relief panel depicting the goddess Durga in motion slaying demon Mahishasura is noteworthy. All the figures carved here with the greatest vivacity, skill, naturalism, and joyousness reflects a breezy lightness of touch.

Casting of bronzes became the most distinctive form of sculpture in South India. The period of the imperial Cholas was an age of continuous improvement and refinement of Dravidian art. The Chola bronzes were created using the lost wax technique, which is known in artistic terms as 'Cire Perdue'. In this process the figure is first sculpted from a mixture of Beeswax and Kungilium (a type of camphor) with a little oil. The entire figure is then coated with clay made from termite hills. The whole thing is dried and fired in an oven with cow-dung cakes. The wax model melts and flows out, and vaporizes. The metal alloy of bronze when melted is poured into the empty clay-mould. This particular bronze alloy is known as Pancha Loham. After filling all crevices when it cools, settles and hardened the mould is broken off. Blemishes are removed, smoothened, finer details are added and polished well and exquisitely poised and supple bronze figure are produced.

The forms of Chola bronzes are very plastic. No intricate ornaments and designs are added. The bronze sculptures are enlivened by the gentle grace, steady and quiet elegance, and above all a distinguished beauty that throbs and pulsates from within. The height of the

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women is shown substantially less than men in these bronzes and they are far more slender. The noses are sharp and head ornamentation is elaborate. Both sexes are depicted without an upper body garment. By means of the facial expressions, the gestures or mudras and the overall body postures bespeak the technical superiority of the artists of the day.

The most famous of all the bronze icons is that of Nataraja, the lord of the cosmic dance of creation and destruction. Surrounding Shiva, a circle of flames represents the universe. Shiva in his left rear palm holds the fire. His left front arm crosses his chest, the hand pointing in "elephant trunk" position (gaja hasta) to his upraised left foot. It signifies liberation. His right foot tramples the Apasmara Purusha, who represents ignorance. Shiva's right front hand is raised in the gesture of benediction (abhaya mudra), while his right rear hand holds a drum. As naga curls around his arms, hair holds the crescent moon and a small image of Ganges, the river-goddess.

Throughout the age of history, life and creativity remained inseparable as a motivating force for the people. Religion played an important role in its development. The innovation and creativity that have exerted lasting influence on the art movement in ancient India never lost its integrity and fundamental characteristics in the course of its evolution through different phases of history. This art assimilated the culture of the foreign nations that came in its way with much harmony and without losing its own basic character. The rare dignity in depiction of various themes and the spirit of life and movement expressed in them could not have been possible without historical, cultural and social changes that Ancient India went through during the period under review.

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