

From the exuberant carvings of Hindu temples to the elegant symmetry of the Taj Mahal, from the luminous wall-paintings of Ajanta to the vibrant images of illustrated manuscripts, the Indian subcontinent offers an amazing visual feast. In this comprehensive survey Vidya Dehejia, a leading authority on Indian art, explains and analyses not only such key early developments as the great cities of the Indus civilization, the serene Buddha image, the intriguing art of cave sites and sophisticated temple-building traditions, but also the luxury of the Mughal court, the palaces and pavilions of Rajasthan, the churches of Portuguese Goa, art in the British Raj, and issues taking art into the twenty-first century.

Using a contextual approach, the book considers the meaning of the word 'art' in the Indian cultural milieu, the relationship between art and the subcontinent's religious traditions, the status of artists and the impact of trade and travel on artistic development. The only full and up-to-date history of the subcontinent's artistic heritage, this is an essential introduction for the student, traveller and general reader.

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Diversity and continuity are twin themes that run through the story of the Indian subcontinent, which is effectively isolated from the rest of the land mass of Asia by the mighty mountain chain the Himalayas, or 'Abode of Snow'. Shaped like an inverted triangle, the subcontinent extends from those lofty heights to the equatorial waters of the Indian Ocean. It is traversed by expansive rivers, which have played a determining role in the life of the people. Three rivers are more important than the rest. Rising in the Himalayas and flowing into the Arabian Sea in the west is the River Sindhu or Indus, from which the word 'India' is derived. Having its source in those same glacial reaches, but flowing east into the Bay of Bengal, is the sacred Ganges; the Jamuna also rises in the mountains but merges eventually with the Ganges. These two life-giving rivers were deified as goddesses and invoked in carvings at the entrance to sacred shrines. The Himalayas are regarded as the hallowed mountain home of the Hindu gods.

The Indian subcontinent is the size of Europe minus Russia, and has as many, if not more, distinct geographic, ethnic, linguistic and cultural boundaries. While palm-fringed beaches and verdant tropical jungles abound in the south, there are snow-bound peaks in the north and sandy desert in the west. Wheat thrives in the dryer climate of the north where the diet revolves around unleavened bread, while the lush paddy fields of the south dictate a diet based on rice. In the deserts of western Rajasthan, women wear vibrant colours enlivened with rich embroideries as if to enhance the muted sand tones of their surroundings; by contrast, in the lagoon stretches of southern Kerala, women wear pure white, woven with an occasional gold thread. In the stark, sub-Himalayan mountain regions artists created plain, undecorated stone temples, while those working

in the fertile plains produced shrines adorned with exuberant sculptural figures of gods and humans.

Today this region, known also as South Asia, consists of a series of nation states – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim and Sri Lanka. In ancient literature the land was called *Bharata-varsha* or Land of Bharata, mythical ancestor of the heroes of India's influential epic, the *Mahabharata*. Early inscriptions, such as one in a first-century Buddhist cave at Karle, speak of the land as *Jambudvipa* or Island of Rose-apple Trees. The geographical boundaries implied by the use of these ancient terms were extremely fluid: at times, *Bharata-varsha* and *Jambudvipa* seem to have extended beyond Afghanistan; at other times, the Indus was the farthest extent. Down the ages, the subcontinent assimilated successive waves of people who entered the country through precarious mountain passes. The central Asian Aryas, Persians, Greeks, Scythians, Shakas, Turks and Afghans all contributed towards the eclectic character of Indian civilization and art. And those who came by sea – the Romans, Arabs, Africans, Portuguese and English – left no less a mark. After all, along with Hindi, India's official and national language, English has continued to serve as a linguistic link between various communities.

The region has been home to several major world religions of which three, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, were initially formulated here. Each of these faiths constructed exquisite and distinctive monuments in honour of its gods and religious leaders. Islam, founded in the Arabian peninsula, reached the western fringes of the subcontinent by the ninth century, and by the thirteenth was well established. Taken as a whole, the subcontinent today houses the world's largest Islamic population (Indonesia being second, and Iraq third). During the centuries of Muslim rule, major Islamic monuments were erected, one such being India's most renowned, the Taj Mahal. The area's latest religion is Sikhism, formulated in the sixteenth century, and a singular outcome of the Hindu-Islamic encounter.

Christianity made its way to the subcontinent, possibly with St Thomas, within years of the death of Christ; when the Portuguese, Dutch, French and British entered the country from the fifteenth century, bringing a variety of denominations, they found Syrian Christians already established in India's south. Today, in St Thomas's cathedral in Madras, the Virgin Mary is clad in a sari while Christ stands on a lotus flanked by peacocks.

In the course of its history, the cultures of the subcontinent also contributed to various foreign cultures with which they came in contact. The profitable Central Asian silk route provided an avenue of contact with China, which regarded its neighbour with respect as the sacred homeland of the Buddha whose faith China had adopted. The eastern sea route, initiated to trade with the various peoples of Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia and Vietnam, was also the conduit by which the religions Hinduism, Buddhism and the Sanskrit language were exchanged. To this day, the Sanskrit word for art, *shilpa*, is visible in the Thai term *sinhipa* used for art, while Indonesia's shadow puppet plays and live stage performances revolve around India's two great epics, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.

This book explores the subcontinent's artistic heritage over some 4,500 years. As terms such as Pakistan and Bangladesh belong to modern history, I have decided, in most cases, to use 'India' for the pre-modern period in place of the more cumbersome 'Indian subcontinent' or 'South Asia'. It is also important to realize that the cultures of the subcontinent share certain common characteristics that frequently override religious distinctions. For instance, Muslims in the Deccan city of Hyderabad share more in cultural terms with their Hindu neighbours than with their Islamic counterparts in, say, far-off Iraq.

The earliest artistic remains belong to the brick cities of the *Indus civilization of the third and second millennia BC*. For a

considerable period thereafter, until the construction of Islamic cities during the thirteenth century AD, the art of India seems to be almost exclusively religious. All ancient monuments and sculptures that have come down to us in the lasting medium of stone are sacred dedications of the Buddhists, Hindus and Jains. However, these surviving remains are somewhat misleading. Early literary works speak eloquently of the magnificent palaces of the monarchs, while ancient narrative sculptures frequently depict intricately constructed city architecture. It would seem that cities and palaces were built of brick and wood, and adorned with sculptures in wood, stucco and terracotta, and with wall paintings, none of which has survived the heat and humidity of the region.

Scholars have often remarked that during this early period India lacked a Western sense of history, as no accurate records of past events were kept. India's cyclical rather than linear concept of time, which was conceived as a vast revolving wheel with cycles of creation, destruction and re-creation, perhaps contributed to an indifference towards historical documentation. Added to this was the immense importance given to the oral tradition; sacred texts, legendary histories and bardic poetry were passed down as chants from one generation to the next. If one defines a sense of history as a consciousness of past events, then India certainly possessed a sense of history. The closest Indian word to indicate history is *itihasa* or 'thus it was'. In India, *itihasa* is embedded in mythology, in genealogies and historical narratives, and these three categories often overlap and blend.

However, ancient rulers left extensive dedicatory inscriptions engraved on stone monuments, as well as sets of copper-plate charters commemorating the donation of lands, villages and cash endowments. While these inscriptions need cautious treatment since they tend to be panegyrics in honour of the monarch and his dynastic line, they yield much information on the economic, political and religious conditions of the time. India's

ancient history is supplemented by a range of ancillary sources that includes allusions in poetic and dramatic works, and the contextual evidence of artistic and archaeological material. For instance, ancient trade routes have been mapped by plotting the location of artistic monuments, especially Buddhist monastic centres.

The picture changed radically with India's Islamic rulers who had a passion for documentation; Mughal emperors, for instance, ordered their every act be recorded, and these annals were then selectively put together to form regnal histories. Post-fifteenth-century Hindu rulers too concerned themselves with recording the major events of their reign. Royalty dominated all such histories in which the common people remained largely invisible. Following the advent of Islamic rule on the subcontinent, fortified cities and palaces began to be built of stone, and the later Hindu rulers followed suit so that the post-twelfth-century architectural remains present a more diverse picture. Painted manuscripts too survive, first on palm leaf and later on paper, often providing a glimpse into the range of artistic tastes of Hindu and Islamic courts and their atmosphere of elegance and luxury.

A European presence became increasingly apparent from the seventeenth century until, finally, the subcontinent became a British possession. The architecture, sculpture and painting produced into the mid-twentieth century reveal the growing impact of Western taste. Today, after fifty years of independence, a new aesthetic is apparent in the subcontinent as artists respond to two equally vital stimulæ: the need to reclaim a neglected and dormant artistic heritage, and the desire to establish itself as modern culture. Today's art does not make a sharp break with the past; rather, the past is reinterpreted and reinvented in unique and innovative ways.

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