

CUET · FINE ARTS · CLASS XI · CODE 312

# Arts of the Mauryan Period

CUET unit: Indian Art — Mauryan period sculpture, pillars and rock-cut architecture

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## Snapshot

- The historical backdrop is the 6th c. BCE shraman movements (Buddhism, Jainism) and the rise of Magadha and the Mauryas under Ashoka in the 3rd c. BCE.
- Three key art-forms define the period — Ashokan stone pillars with animal capitals, monumental Yaksha/Yakshini sculptures, and rock-cut caves (Lomus Rishi).
- Two landmark sculptures stand out — the Sarnath Lion Capital (national emblem) and the Didargunj Yakshini.
- Key developments: early stupa architecture, the symbolic vs. narrative phases of Buddhist representation, and the collective pattern of patronage.
- CUET routinely tests the proper-noun-dense facts here: capital figures, sites, sects, patrons, and component parts of the Lion Capital.
- Lays the groundwork for the Post-Mauryan chapter (kefa104) by introducing stupa terminology — anda, harmika, chhatra — that will reappear at Bharhut and Sanchi.

## Detailed Notes

### 2.1 Core concepts

The sixth century BCE in the Gangetic valley was a period of intense religious and social ferment, marked by the rise of new shraman or ascetic traditions — Buddhism and Jainism — that stood apart from, and in many respects opposed, the varna and jati systems of the older Vedic-Brahmanical religion (NCERT §Intro, p. 19). Out of the political chaos of the sixteen mahajanapadas, Magadha emerged as the dominant kingdom; by the fourth century BCE the Mauryas had consolidated power in the eastern Gangetic plain, and by the third century BCE a large part of the subcontinent was under Mauryan control. Ashoka, the most powerful Mauryan king, extended royal patronage to the Buddhist shraman tradition, and the resulting fusion of imperial resources with Buddhist symbolism produced the first great phase of Indian monumental art (NCERT §Intro, p. 19).

NCERT is careful to note that worship in this period was plural, not monolithic. Yaksha worship and mother-goddess worship were widespread both before and after the rise of Buddhism, and Yaksha cults were assimilated into both Buddhism and Jainism as

protective and attendant deities — a syncretism that explains why colossal Yaksha and Yakshini statues stand alongside Buddhist pillars in the Mauryan archaeological record (NCERT §Intro, p. 19). Apart from stupas and viharas, the Mauryan age produced three principal art-categories: stone pillars with animal capitals, rock-cut caves, and monumental figure sculptures of Yakshas and Yakshinis.

A fundamental technical distinction frames the entire pillars discussion. Mauryan pillars are rock-cut — that is, each pillar is a single monolith hewn from a quarry and transported and erected as a unit, "thus displaying the carver's skill." Achaemenian pillars, by contrast, were built in pieces by a mason and assembled in situ (NCERT §Pillars, p. 19). This contrast is repeatedly tested in CUET because it disposes of the older colonial argument that the Mauryan pillars are merely derivative of Persepolis: the techniques are categorically different. Ashokan pillars also bear inscriptions — the edicts of Dhamma — and their tops carry vigorous animal-capital figures (bull, lion, elephant) standing on a square or circular abacus decorated with stylised lotuses.

NCERT lists the surviving pillars and their sites with precision, because site-to-state matching is a standing CUET trap. Three surviving pillars are from Bihar — Basarrah-Bakhira, Lauriya-Nandangarh and Rampurva. Two are from Uttar Pradesh — Sankisa and Sarnath (NCERT §Pillars, pp. 19–20). The Sarnath Lion Capital is singled out as "the finest example of Mauryan sculpture" and as India's national emblem, symbolising the Dhammachakrapravartana — the first sermon of the Buddha at Sarnath (NCERT §Pillars, p. 20).

Beyond pillars, there are monumental Yaksha and Yakshini sculptures from Patna, Vidisha and Mathura. These are typically standing, free-standing, life-size or larger, with a polished surface and a full-round face with pronounced cheeks. The Didargunj Yakshi from Patna is named as the finest example. Terracotta figurines from the same period treat the body very differently, often more linearly and miniaturily. NCERT also flags the rock-cut elephant at Dhauri in Odisha, modelled in the round with linear rhythm and bearing an Ashokan rock-edict — a rare example of figure sculpture and edict combined on a living rock outcrop (NCERT §Pillars, p. 20).

Rock-cut caves are introduced through a single early example. The Lomus Rishi cave at the Barabar hills near Gaya in Bihar was donated by Ashoka to the Ajivika sect — a third heterodox tradition that flourished alongside Buddhism and Jainism. The cave has a semicircular chaitya-arch facade with an elephant frieze carved in high relief, and a rectangular interior hall with a circular chamber at the back. CUET examiners often test the sectarian patronage of Lomus Rishi, because students reflexively associate Ashokan caves with Buddhism (NCERT §Pillars, p. 20).

The stupa section opens with a list of the original burial sites of the Buddha's relics. The relics were enshrined in stupas at Rajagraha, Vaishali, Vethadipa and Pava in Bihar; Kapilavastu, Allakappa, Ramagrama (Nepal); Kushinagar and Pippalvina in present-day Uttar Pradesh; and textual tradition adds Avanti and Gandhara outside the Gangetic valley (NCERT §Stupas, p. 21). A surviving third-century-BCE stupa is at Bairat in

Rajasthan, and the Great Stupa at Sanchi was originally built with bricks in Ashoka's time and later covered with stone, with toranas and railings added in subsequent reigns.

Patronage in this period was collective, not merely imperial. From the second century BCE, inscriptions on stupa railings and gateways name a wide spectrum of donors — lay devotees, gahapatis (householders), kings and guilds — with royal patronage being relatively rare. Artisan names also appear: Kanha is recorded at Pitalkhora, and his disciple Balaka at Kondane in Maharashtra. Artisan categories include stone carvers, goldsmiths, stone-polishers and carpenters (NCERT §Stupas, pp. 21, 26).

The Sarnath Lion Capital, the single most-tested object in the syllabus, breaks down anatomically as follows. The capital originally had five component parts: (i) the pillar shaft below; (ii) an inverted lotus bell base; (iii) a drum on the bell base showing four animals proceeding clockwise; (iv) four addorsed lions seated back-to-back; and (v) the crowning Dharmachakra wheel, which is now broken and kept in the Sarnath site museum. The National Emblem of India retains only the addorsed lions and the abacus, omitting both the crowning wheel and the lotus base — a fact often missed by students who incorrectly include all five parts in the emblem (NCERT §Lion Capital, p. 23).

The abacus drum itself merits close study. It carries a chakra with twenty-four spokes oriented to all four directions, and four animals — bull, horse, elephant and lion — placed between every chakra. This twenty-four-spoke chakra became the visual representation of the Dharmachakra in subsequent Buddhist art, and is the direct source of the wheel on the Indian national flag (NCERT §Lion Capital, p. 23).

NCERT closes the close-up sculpture studies with the Didargunj Yakshini, now in the Patna Museum. She is a life-size, well-proportioned, free-standing sandstone sculpture with a polished surface; she holds a chauri (fly-whisk) in her right hand, while her left hand is broken. The polish of the Mauryan surface, the volumetric modelling and the relaxed weight-shift place her among the highest accomplishments of early Indian stone sculpture (NCERT §Didargunj Yakshini, p. 25).

The final section discusses how Buddhist art changed from the second century BCE onwards. Stupa architecture was elaborated with circumambulatory paths enclosed by railings, the addition of gateways (toranas), and an expansion of sculptural decoration. A typical stupa consists of a cylindrical drum supporting a circular anda (dome), surmounted by a square railed harmika and one or more chhatras (umbrellas). In early Buddhism, the Buddha himself was depicted only symbolically — by footprints, a stupa, a lotus throne or a chakra. The narrative depiction of the Buddha grew later, in synoptic, continuous and episodic modes on railings and toranas. The four main life-events selected for representation are the birth, the renunciation, the enlightenment, the dhammachakrapravartana (first sermon) and the mahaparinibbana (death) — five episodes in total, sometimes counted as four by clubbing two together. The Jataka stories frequently depicted include the Chhadanta, Vidurpundita, Ruru, Sibi, Vessantara and Shama Jatakas (NCERT §Narrative, p. 26).

## 2.2 Definitions to memorise

Term	Definition	Page
Shraman tradition	Ascetic religious tradition (Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivika) opposing varna and jati	19
Yaksha / Yakshini	Folk male/female nature spirits whose worship was assimilated into Buddhism and Jainism	19–20
Mahajanapadas	Sixteen great kingdoms of the 6th c. BCE Gangetic valley	19
Abacus	Square or circular slab below the capital figure of a pillar, decorated with stylised lotuses	20
Dhammachakrapravartana	The first sermon of the Buddha at Sarnath, symbolised by the Lion Capital	20, 23
Chaitya arch	Semicircular arch decorating the facade of rock-cut caves (e.g. Lomus Rishi)	20
Stupa	Buddhist monastic monument with cylindrical drum, circular anda, harmika and chhatra	21, 26
Anda	Hemispherical dome of a stupa	26
Harmika	Square railed platform at the top of the anda	26
Chhatra	Umbrella crowning the stupa	26
Gahapati	Householder donor / patron mentioned in stupa inscriptions	21
Chauri	Fly-whisk held by the Didargunj Yakshini in her right hand	25
Addorsed lions	Lions placed back-to-back, as on the Sarnath capital	23
Dharamchakra	The crowning wheel of the Sarnath Lion Capital, now broken	23
Synoptic narrative	Multiple events shown together in one frame	26
Continuous narrative	One scene flows into the next without strict frames	26
Episodic narrative	Sequential discrete frames	26
Ajivika	Heterodox sect patronised by Ashoka at Lomus Rishi	20
Vihara	Buddhist monastic residence	19
Lomus Rishi	Earliest known rock-cut cave, Barabar hills, Bihar	20
Didargunj Yakshini	Life-size sandstone chauri-bearer, Patna Museum	25
Bairat	Rajasthan site with a surviving 3rd c. BCE stupa	21
Sanchi	Great Stupa, originally Ashokan brick, later stone-cased	21

## 2.3 Diagrams / processes to remember

The Mauryan visual repertoire is dominated by a small set of recurring profiles that CUET aspirants should be able to identify at sight. The pillar profile begins with a smooth monolithic shaft, narrows slightly upward, supports an inverted lotus bell (sometimes called a "campaniform" capital), which in turn carries the abacus — a square or circular slab decorated with stylised lotus motifs, and finally the animal figure (lion, bull or elephant) crowning the assembly (p. 19). At Sarnath the assembly culminates in four adorsed lions and originally in a Dharamchakra wheel; at other sites it is a single lion, bull or elephant.

The Yaksha Parkham plate (p. 20) shows the colossal frontal standing form that characterises Mauryan figure sculpture — broad shoulders, pronounced abdomen, polished sandstone surface. The Dhauli elephant (p. 21) is a key example because the elephant is carved in the round emerging directly from the living rock, paired with an Ashokan edict on the rock face below. The Lomus Rishi facade (p. 21) shows the semicircular chaitya arch with the elephant frieze in high relief and the door cut beneath the arch.

The Sarnath Lion Capital plate (pp. 22–23) is best memorised in five tiers, bottom to top: (1) the shaft (broken away in the surviving piece), (2) the inverted lotus bell, (3) the abacus drum with 24-spoke chakras and four animals (bull, horse, elephant, lion) in clockwise procession, (4) four adorsed lions seated back-to-back facing the four cardinal directions, (5) the crowning Dharamchakra wheel (now in the site museum). The Didargunj Yakshini plate (pp. 24–25) presents front and back views — a standing chauri-bearer in highly polished sandstone, with the right hand holding the whisk and the left hand broken at the wrist. The Bharhut stupa-worship relief (p. 26) demonstrates the early symbolic mode — devotees worshipping an empty stupa, with no human figure of the Buddha himself.

## 2.4 Common confusions / NTA trap points

- Mauryan vs Achaemenian pillars: Mauryan are rock-cut monoliths; Achaemenian are built in pieces by a mason. NTA often inverts.
- The Lomus Rishi cave was donated by Ashoka to the **Ajivika** sect — not Buddhist or Jain. Trap distractors will say "Buddhist" or "Jain."
- The Sarnath capital had **five** components; the National Emblem omits the crowning Dharamchakra wheel AND the inverted lotus base.
- Sankisa and Sarnath are in **Uttar Pradesh**; Basarah-Bakhira, Lauriya-Nandangarh and Rampurva are in **Bihar**.
- The 24-spoke chakra is on the **abacus drum**, not at the very top of the capital.
- Didargunj Yakshini holds the chauri in the **right** hand; the **left** hand is broken.
- Buddha's representation was initially **symbolic** (footprints, stupa, chakra) — human image came later. NTA likes to reverse this chronology.

- The four animals on the Sarnath abacus are bull, horse, elephant, lion — NOT bull, deer, elephant, lion.
- Stupa anatomy: anda (dome) → harmika (square railing on top) → chhatra (umbrella). Do not interchange harmika and chhatra.
- The Mahajanaka Jataka is NOT in the NCERT list of frequently depicted Jatakas (Chhadanta, Vidurpundita, Ruru, Sibi, Vessantara, Shama).
- The Bairat stupa is in Rajasthan, not Bihar.
- The "Yaksha worship" was assimilated into Buddhism AND Jainism, not only Buddhism.

## 2.5 Key artworks / artists

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Sarnath Lion Capital	3rd c. BCE, Ashokan	Finest Mauryan sculpture; India's national emblem	22-23
Rampurva Bull Capital	3rd c. BCE, Ashokan	Surviving Bihar pillar capital	20
Lauriya-Nandangarh pillar	3rd c. BCE, Ashokan	Bihar pillar with single lion capital	19-20
Basarah-Bakhira pillar	3rd c. BCE, Ashokan	Bihar pillar	20
Sankisa pillar	3rd c. BCE, Ashokan	UP pillar with elephant capital	20
Yaksha, Parkham	Mauryan	Monumental standing Yaksha, illustrates Yaksha worship	20
Didargunj Yakshini	Mauryan, Patna	Life-size sandstone chauri-bearer, polished surface	24-25
Vidisha Yaksha/ Yakshini	Mauryan	Regional sculpture group	20
Mathura Yaksha/ Yakshini	Mauryan	Regional sculpture group	20
Dhauri rock-cut elephant	Ashokan, Odisha	Rock-cut elephant with edict, modelled in the round	21
Lomus Rishi cave	Ashokan, Barabar hills	Earliest rock-cut cave; Ajivika; chaitya-arch facade with elephant frieze	20
Bairat stupa	3rd c. BCE, Rajasthan	Surviving Ashokan stupa remnant	21
Great Stupa at Sanchi	Ashokan core, later additions	Originally brick, later stone-encased	21

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Bharhut stupa railing	2nd c. BCE	Early symbolic Buddhist narrative	26
Kanha (artisan)	2nd c. BCE	Named carver at Pitalkhora	21
Balaka (artisan)	2nd c. BCE	Kanha's disciple at Kondane, Maharashtra	21
Chhadanta Jataka relief	Post-Mauryan	Six-tusked elephant Jataka	26
Vessantara Jataka relief	Post-Mauryan	Prince Vessantara's charity	26
Sibi Jataka relief	Post-Mauryan	King Sibi's self-sacrifice	26
Ruru Jataka relief	Post-Mauryan	Golden deer Jataka	26

## Practice MCQs

## PYQ Alignment

This chapter is high-yield for CUET Fine Arts: typically 4–6 MCQs annually, focused on the Sarnath Lion Capital's components, Lomus Rishi cave's sectarian patronage (Ajivika), pillar sites and their states, Mauryan vs Achaemenian pillar distinction, Didargunj Yakshini features, and the four (or five) life-events of the Buddha. Match-the-following and statement-based formats dominate over single-line recall. CUET 2024 set a four-statement question on the Lion Capital that tested both the 24-spoke chakra fact and the National Emblem omissions. CUET 2025 carried a site-state match question on the five Ashokan pillars.