

CUET · FINE ARTS · CLASS XI · CODE 312

# Post-Mauryan Trends in Indian Art and Architecture

CUET unit: Post-Mauryan sculpture, Buddhist stupa architecture,  
schools of sculpture (Mathura, Gandhara, Sarnath, Amaravati),  
rock-cut cave tradition (Ajanta, Ellora, Elephanta).

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## Snapshot

- The post-Mauryan sculptural-architectural landscape (2nd c. BCE – 6th c. CE) ran under Shungas, Kanvas, Kushanas and Guptas in the north and Satavahanas, Ikshvakus and Vakatakas in the south/west.
- Three sculpture schools developed — Mathura (indigenous, Yaksha-based), Gandhara (Greco-Roman/Hellenistic), Sarnath (slender, transparent drapery) — alongside four major stupa/cave traditions: Bharhut, Sanchi, Amaravati, and Western Indian caves.
- The Buddha's depiction shifted from symbolic to anthropomorphic, and Vajrayana Bodhisattva imagery rose.
- CUET questions concentrate on rock-cut architecture (chaitya/vihara typology), Ajanta paintings, and the Maheshmurti at Elephanta.
- Frequently tested via match-the-following (site → state/feature), assertion-reason on stylistic features, and case-based questions on specific Cave numbers.
- This is the most weight-heavy chapter of Class XI Fine Arts and lays the foundation for all later painting and temple-architecture chapters.

## Detailed Notes

### 2.1 Core concepts

NCERT frames the post-Mauryan period (c. 2nd century BCE to 6th century CE) as a multi-dynastic mosaic that produced an extraordinarily rich and stylistically diverse body of Indian art. In the north and central regions, the Shungas, Kanvas, Kushanas and Guptas succeeded one another, while in the south and west the Satavahanas, Ikshvakus, Abhiras and Vakatakas held sway. Out of this geographical and political plurality emerged a constellation of important sculpture sites — Vidisha, Bharhut, Bodhgaya, Jaggayyapeta, Mathura, Khandagiri-Udaigiri, Bhaja and Pavani — that anticipate the major schools of the next centuries (NCERT §Intro, p. 27).

NCERT begins its detailed study with Bharhut. The Bharhut sculptures are tall, recalling the proportions of Mauryan Yaksha and Yakshini images, but they are carved in low relief, with figures that cling to the picture plane and a tilted perspective device that gives the impression of depth. Folded hands rest flat against the chest. Narrative panels include Queen Mayadevi's dream — in which a descending elephant heads toward her

womb, the first sign of the Buddha-to-be's conception — and the Ruru Jataka, in which a Bodhisattva-deer rescues a man. Knotted headgear is a consistent male feature of the first–second centuries BCE at Bharhut (NCERT §Bharhut, pp. 27–29).

The next major monument is the Great Stupa at Sanchi (Stupa-1), which crystallises post-Mauryan stupa architecture. NCERT prescribes the canonical anatomy: anda (the hemispherical dome), harmika (the square railing-like structure crowning the anda), chhatra (the umbrella above the harmika), medhi (the drum that supports the anda), vedika (the railing enclosing the pradakshinapatha), pradakshinapatha (the circumambulatory path) and torana (the decorated gateway). Sanchi Stupa-1 carries upper and lower pradakshinapathas and four decorated toranas illustrating Buddha-life and Jataka scenes. The figures are in high relief with naturalistic posture and no body stiffness, marking a clear advance over the low-relief Bharhut style (NCERT §Sanchi, p. 29).

NCERT also distinguishes the three Sanchi stupas: Stupa-1 is the largest and main monument; Stupa-2 contains relics of ten arhats; Stupa-3 contains the relics of the Buddha's two chief disciples, Sariputta and Mahamougalayana. The south torana was the first to be carved; the Ashokan lion-capital pillar inscription is on the southern side of the complex (NCERT §Stupa-1 Sanchi, p. 47).

From the first century CE, three regional centres rose to dominance: Gandhara (in present-day Pakistan), Mathura (in north India) and Vengi (in Andhra Pradesh) (NCERT §Mathura-Sarnath-Gandhara, p. 30). The Gandhara school shows pronounced Bactrian, Parthian and Hellenistic influence, producing wavy-haired, classically draped Buddhas whose physiognomy is essentially Greco-Roman. The Mathura school, by contrast, develops the Buddha image out of indigenous Yaksha prototypes, producing robust, fleshy figures with a powerful frontality. Mathura is also a major centre for Vaishnava (Vishnu) and Shaiva (linga, mukhalinga) images, identified by their characteristic ayudhas or weapons. By the second century CE Mathura images become noticeably fleshier and more sensual; by the fifth and sixth centuries CE the drapery is integrated into the sculptural mass, producing the great mature Gupta-Mathura type (NCERT §Mathura, pp. 30–31).

The Sarnath school of the later fifth century CE is distinguished from Mathura by its plain transparent drapery covering both shoulders and by a halo with very little ornamentation. Mathura Buddhas of the same period, in contrast, carry folded drapery and a profusely decorated halo — a stylistic contrast that recurs in CUET in Assertion-Reason format (NCERT §Sarnath, p. 31).

NCERT devotes a careful section to the Amaravati Stupa in Andhra Pradesh, whose pradakshinapatha is enclosed by a vedika. The most distinctive feature of Amaravati is that the domical anda was covered with relief sculptural slabs — a unique feature among the major stupas. The torana has now disappeared; the surviving figures show pronounced tribhanga (three bends in the body) and intense emotional expression. Sannati in Gulbarga district of Karnataka is the largest stupa site so far excavated, and

Guntapalle near Eluru is a rock-cut site preserving apsidal and circular chaitya halls of the second century BCE (NCERT §Buddhist Monuments of South India, pp. 32–33).

The western Indian Buddhist caves are then organised into three architectural types: (i) apsidal vault-roof chaitya halls (Ajanta, Pitalkhora, Bhaja); (ii) apsidal vault-roof pillarless halls (Thana-Nadsur); and (iii) flat-roofed quadrangular halls with a circular chamber at the back (Kondivite). Karla has the largest rock-cut chaitya hall; Kanheri Cave No. 3 elaborates the Karla plan; the flat-roofed quadrangular vihara becomes the most preferred design in subsequent centuries (NCERT §Cave Tradition Western India, pp. 34–35). Junnar has more than 200 cave excavations — the largest single cluster; Kanheri near Mumbai has 108 excavated caves. Junnar's Ganeshleni vihara was renamed after a later-installed Ganesha image.

Ajanta — the centrepiece of NCERT's cave tradition discussion — has 29 caves in Aurangabad district. Four of them are chaitya caves: Caves 10 and 9 belong to the earlier phase (2nd–1st century BCE), and Caves 19 and 26 belong to the later phase (5th century CE). Cave 26 contains the famous colossal Mahaparinibbana image of the dying Buddha. The patrons whose names are inscribed include Varahadeva, Upendragupta, Buddhabhadra and Mathuradasa (NCERT §Ajanta, p. 36). Ajanta is the only surviving example of Indian painting from the first century BCE and from the fifth century CE — a fact that elevates the site beyond Buddhist art into a cornerstone of world art history. The paintings of Caves 1, 2, 16 and 17 are the best preserved. Themes include the Jatakas, the Avadanas, the Mahajanaka Jataka, the Chaddanta Jataka and the Simhala Avadana (NCERT §Ajanta, pp. 36–39).

Ellora, 100 km from Ajanta, has 34 caves with monasteries of three religions — Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jain — dating from the 5th to the 11th century CE. Cave No. 16, the Kailash leni (also called Kailasa), is a monolithic rock-cut temple carved from a single rock; Cave No. 14 is the only double-storey Brahmanical cave at the site (NCERT §Ellora, pp. 40–42). The Bagh Caves, 97 km from Dhar in Madhya Pradesh, are Buddhist viharas; only five of the original nine caves survive. Bagh Cave No. 4 is called Rang Mahal (Palace of Colours). The paintings were physically removed in 1982 and are now housed in the Archaeological Museum at Gwalior (NCERT §Bagh, p. 42).

Elephanta near Mumbai is Shaivite and contemporary with Ellora. Its Maheshmurti shows three visible faces of a five-faced Shiva conception: Shiva-Bhairava in profile (angry, with bulging eye and moustache), the central Shiva, and Uma (his consort). The shilpa texts speak of five integrated faces, of which only three are visible (NCERT §Elephanta, pp. 42, 58–59). The eastern Indian cave tradition is represented by the Udaigiri-Khandagiri caves near Bhubaneswar in Odisha, which bear inscriptions of the Jain king Kharavela and were meant for Jain monks; Anakapalli (also in the south-east) has the biggest rock-cut stupas in India (NCERT §Cave Tradition in Eastern India, pp. 43–45).

NCERT closes with three close-study sculptures. The Katra Mound Mathura Buddha (2nd century CE, Kushana period) shows the Buddha in padmasana with the right hand

in abhayamudra, an ushnisha with a vertical projection, a lion throne, and two attendant figures identified as Padmapani (with lotus) and Vajrapani (with vajra). The Sarnath Seated Buddha (late 5th century CE, Chunar sandstone) is in dharmachakrapravartana mudra, with a chakra and two deer below the throne, transparent drapery and a plain central halo. The Gandhara Buddha Head from Taxila (2nd century CE) shows hybridised Greco-Roman and Hellenistic features — thick curly hair, large forehead, half-closed eyes and sharp linear outlines — assimilating Achaemenian, Parthian and Bactrian traits (NCERT §Close studies, pp. 48–53).

## 2.2 Definitions to memorise

Term	Definition	Page
Pradakshinapatha	Circumambulatory path around the stupa	29
Anda	Hemispherical/domical part of the stupa	29
Harmika	Square railing-like structure atop the anda	29
Chhatri	Umbrella above the harmika	29
Torana	Decorated gateway of a stupa	29
Medhi	Drum/base of the stupa supporting the anda	29
Vedika	Railing enclosing the pradakshinapatha	29
Tribhanga	Body shown with three bends, typical of Amaravati	32
Padmasana	Cross-folded leg seated posture of the Buddha	49
Abhayamudra	Hand gesture of fearlessness (raised right hand)	49
Dharmachakrapravartana mudra	Preaching gesture — Sarnath Buddha pose	53
Ushnisha	Hair-knot/cranial protuberance on Buddha's head	49
Sanghati	Garment/robe of the Buddha	49
Shalabhanjika	Lady holding a tree branch — figure on Sanchi toranas	47
Chaitya	Apsidal/rectangular prayer hall with stupa at the back	34
Vihara	Monastery — veranda, hall and cells around hall	35
Mahaparinibbana	The final passing of the Buddha (Cave 26, Ajanta)	36
Mukhalinga	Linga with face(s) — Shaiva imagery at Mathura	30
Ayudhas	Weapons/attributes identifying Vishnu, Shiva etc	30
Padmapani	Lotus-bearing Bodhisattva attendant	49
Vajrapani	Vajra-bearing Bodhisattva attendant	49
Kailash leni	Monolithic rock-cut temple, Ellora Cave 16	41

Term	Definition	Page
Rang Mahal	Painted Cave 4 at Bagh	42
Maheshmurti	Five-faced (three visible) Shiva sculpture at Elephanta	59

### 2.3 Diagrams / processes to remember

The Plan of Stupa-1 at Sanchi (p. 29) is the single most-tested diagram in this chapter: candidates should be able to label chhatra, harmika, anda, medhi, vedika, pradakshinapatha and torana in their correct positions. The Yakshini relief from Bharhut (p. 27) demonstrates the low-relief, tilted-perspective style that contrasts with the high-relief Sanchi toranas. The Queen Maya's dream panel and the Ruru Jataka panel (p. 28) anchor early narrative iconography. The Sanghol stupa railing fragments (p. 30) show the spread of the Mathura tradition into Punjab. The Meditating Buddha (Gandhara, 3rd–4th c. CE) and Gandhara Bodhisattva (5th–6th c. CE) plates (p. 31) demonstrate the wavy-haired classical Greco-Roman head type. The Amaravati stupa-drum slab (p. 32) demonstrates the unique relief-clad anda.

Cave plans students should recognise include Chaitya Cave 12 Bhaja, the Karla chaitya hall, and Nashik Cave 3 (pp. 34–35). The Padmapani Bodhisattva from Ajanta Cave 1 (p. 54) is the most-reproduced Ajanta painting, recognised by the calm half-closed eyes, the lotus held delicately, and the rich pearl jewellery. The Mara Vijaya panel in Ajanta Cave 26 (pp. 56–57) is the largest sculptural panel at the site, showing the Buddha's victory over Mara's army. The Maheshmurti at Elephanta (pp. 58–59) is identified by its three colossal visible faces — the central Shiva, the angry Bhairava in profile, and Uma in feminine profile. The Katra Mound Buddha (Mathura, p. 49) is identified by the lion throne, abhayamudra and flanking attendants. The Sarnath Seated Buddha (p. 53) is identified by the chakra and deer below the throne.

### 2.4 Common confusions / NTA trap points

- Sanchi Stupa-1 vs Stupa-2 vs Stupa-3: Stupa-1 is the largest and main; Stupa-2 has relics of 10 arhats; Stupa-3 has Sariputta and Mahamougalayana relics. Students often swap.
- Mathura Buddha (folded drapery, decorated halo) vs Sarnath Buddha (transparent drapery covering both shoulders, plain halo) — frequently confused.
- Gandhara school = Greco-Roman / Hellenistic origin; Mathura school = indigenous Yaksha origin — NTA tests origin and lineage.
- Cave Nos. 19 and 26 at Ajanta are chaitya caves of the later phase; Cave Nos. 9 and 10 are chaitya caves of the earlier phase. Cave 10 also preserves paintings.
- Kailash leni / Ellora Cave 16 is a monolithic rock-cut temple, not a regular cave — and is Brahmanical, not Buddhist.

- Junnar has 200+ caves — the largest cluster; Kanheri has 108 caves. Do not confuse "largest cave hall" (Karla chaitya) with "largest number of caves" (Junnar).
- Sannati in Karnataka (Gulbarga district) is the largest stupa site so far excavated — not Amaravati.
- Amaravati's distinctive feature is that the dome itself is covered with relief sculptural slabs — unique among stupas.
- Bagh Cave 4 is called Rang Mahal — not Cave 1 or 2.
- Elephanta's Maheshmurti shows three visible faces of a conceived five-faced Shiva. NTA distractors say "all five faces are visible."
- Udaigiri-Khandagiri caves are Jain (Kharavela inscription), not Buddhist.
- The four chief patrons of Ajanta named in NCERT are Varahadeva, Upendragupta, Buddhahadra and Mathuradasa.

## 2.5 Key artworks / artists

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Bharhut Yakshini relief	2nd c. BCE	Low-relief, clinging-to-plane modelling	27
Queen Maya's Dream, Bharhut	2nd c. BCE	Narrative relief; descending elephant motif	28
Ruru Jataka, Bharhut	2nd c. BCE	Bodhisattva-deer rescuing a man	28
Sanchi Stupa-1, North/South Torana	1st c. BCE	Naturalistic high-relief Jatakas	29, 47
Sanchi Shalabhanjika	1st c. BCE	Bracket figure on Sanchi torana	47
Sanghol stupa railing	1st–2nd c. CE	Mathura school spread into Punjab	30
Katra Mound Buddha	2nd c. CE, Mathura	Kushana padmasana abhayamudra, lion throne	48–49
Sarnath Seated Buddha	Late 5th c. CE	Dhammachakrapravartana, chakra-deer base	52–53
Gandhara Buddha Head, Taxila	2nd c. CE	Greco-Roman wavy hair, sharp linearity	50–51
Gandhara Meditating Buddha	3rd–4th c. CE	Mature Hellenistic-Buddhist synthesis	31
Gandhara Bodhisattva	5th–6th c. CE	Late Gandhara school	31
Amaravati drum slab	2nd c. CE	Relief-clad anda; tribhanga figures	32
Bhaja Cave 12 chaitya	2nd c. BCE	Early apsidal vault-roof hall	34
Karla chaitya	1st c. CE	Largest rock-cut chaitya hall	35

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Kanheri Cave 3	2nd c. CE	Elaboration of Karla plan	35
Padmapani Bodhisattva, Ajanta Cave 1	5th c. CE	Best-preserved Ajanta mural	54
Mara Vijaya, Ajanta Cave 26	5th c. CE	Largest sculptural panel at Ajanta	56–57
Kailash Ieni, Ellora Cave 16	8th c. CE	Monolithic rock-cut Brahmanical temple	41
Bagh Cave 4 (Rang Mahal)	5th–7th c. CE	Painted Buddhist vihara, paintings now in Gwalior	42
Maheshmurti, Elephanta	Early 6th c. CE	Three-visible-face Shiva colossus	58–59

## Practice MCQs

## PYQ Alignment

This chapter is one of the highest-yielding for CUET Fine Arts — typically 5–7 MCQs per year. Past papers favour match-the-following on cave sites and their distinctive features (Karla, Ajanta, Ellora, Elephanta), iconographic identification of the Mathura/Gandhara/Sarnath Buddha images, and statement-based questions on stupa architectural vocabulary (anda, harmika, torana, vedika, pradakshinapatha). CUET 2023 set a four-statement Ajanta question very close to Q5 above; CUET 2024 set a stupa-anatomy match question; CUET 2025 set an Elephanta Maheshmurti identification question.