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CUET · FINE ARTS · CLASS XI · CODE 312

Prehistoric Rock Paintings

CUET unit: Pre-historic Rock Paintings (Unit 1, History of Indian Art)

By **UniDrill** · NCERT-grounded study material

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📌 Snapshot

- Indian art begins with Upper Palaeolithic to Chalcolithic rock paintings on cave walls.
- Key sites: Lakhudiyar (Uttarakhand), Kupgallu/Piklihal/Tekkalkota (Karnataka–Andhra), and the richest site, Bhimbetka (Madhya Pradesh).
- This is foundational for CUET Fine Arts Unit I — questions typically test sites, periods, subjects, colours/pigments, discoverers, and techniques.
- Archaeology and art history connect here: rock paintings sit alongside tools, pottery and bones as evidence of early human life.
- The Bhimbetka three-period scheme (Upper Palaeolithic / Mesolithic / Chalcolithic) recurs in higher Fine Arts questions.
- Key terms: superimposition, haematite, chalcedony, geru, naturalistic versus stylistic depiction — all of which return in later chapters on murals (Ajanta) and on miniature painting traditions.

📖 Detailed Notes

2.1 Core concepts

The earliest evidence of Indian art lies in the deep prehistoric past, before writing, before pottery, before the wheel — when human beings still lived as hunter-gatherers and used cave walls and rock-shelter ceilings as the first canvas. The prehistoric period in the early development of human beings is commonly known as the Old Stone Age or the Palaeolithic Age; painting and drawing were the oldest art forms practised by humans, even before they domesticated animals or learned to make pots (NCERT §Intro, p. 1). This is the foundation of every subsequent unit of CUET Fine Arts — every later mural, every Buddhist cave fresco, every Mughal miniature inherits, at a long remove, the same basic vocabulary of pigment, brush, line and figure.

NCERT makes a careful chronological distinction: in India the earliest paintings have been reported from the Upper Palaeolithic times, not the Lower Palaeolithic. Lower Palaeolithic people are not known to have produced art objects; it is the Upper Palaeolithic that saw a proliferation of artistic activity around the world, with Europe's Lascaux and Altamira caves as the most celebrated examples (NCERT §Intro, p. 1). Subjects of these worldwide prehistoric drawings, NCERT notes, were broadly similar — human figures, human activities, geometric designs and animal symbols (NCERT §Intro,

p. 1). This shared vocabulary across continents is significant for CUET because it shows that prehistoric art was a near-universal human impulse, not an Indian peculiarity.

A pivotal piece of factual information that NCERT foregrounds is the date of discovery. The first discovery of rock paintings in India was made in 1867–68 by archaeologist Archibold Carlleyle — twelve years before the discovery of Altamira in Spain in 1879 (NCERT §p. 2). NCERT names four other early discoverers — Cockburn, Anderson, Mitra and Ghosh — whose surveys in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries extended the catalogue of Indian sites. Geographically, NCERT records that rock paintings have been found in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Bihar, and the Kumaon hills of Uttarakhand (NCERT §p. 2). The opening map shows sites such as Bhimbetka, Pachmarhi, Mirzapur, Raigarh, Bellary and Edakal Cave, locating prehistoric art across the entire subcontinent.

NCERT's first detailed site description is of Lakhudiyar, on the River Suyal on the Almora–Barechina road in Uttarakhand. The name itself means "one lakh caves," signalling the scale and density of rock-shelters in this Kumaon stretch. NCERT classifies Lakhudiyar paintings into three categories — man, animal and geometric patterns — using a restricted palette of white, black and red ochre (NCERT §Lakhudiyar, p. 2). Human figures are reduced to stick-like forms, while the principal animals depicted are a long-snouted animal, a fox and a multiple-legged lizard. NCERT singles out the hand-linked dancing figures as a notable scene because they prefigure community dance scenes later found at Bhimbetka. Crucially for CUET, NCERT records a specific superimposition order at Lakhudiyar: the earliest paintings are in black, over these are red ochre paintings, and the last group comprises white paintings (NCERT §p. 2). This three-stage colour chronology is one of the most-asked single facts in CUET Fine Arts Unit I.

Moving south, the granite rocks of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh were used by Neolithic man, and NCERT names three famous sites — Kupgallu, Piklihal and Tekkalkota. These sites preserve three painting types — white, red ochre over white, and red ochre alone — belonging respectively to the late historical, early historical and Neolithic periods. The subjects observed include bulls, elephants, sambhars, gazelles, sheep, goats, horses, stylised humans and tridents, but vegetal motifs are rare (NCERT §p. 2–3). This contrast — the southern Deccan favouring herd and game animals on granite, the Vindhyas favouring expansive narrative scenes on sandstone — is a recurring CUET comparison.

The bulk of NCERT's chapter is devoted to Bhimbetka, located in the Vindhya ranges of Madhya Pradesh, with their Kaimurean extensions running into Uttar Pradesh. Bhimbetka is the largest and most spectacular rock-shelter complex in India — 45 kilometres south of Bhopal, covering an area of 10 square kilometres, with about 800 rock shelters of which approximately 500 bear paintings (NCERT §Bhimbetka, p. 3). The site was discovered in 1957–58 by archaeologist V. S. Wakankar, and is today a UNESCO-recognised treasure of world prehistory. NCERT explains that Bhimbetka rock art is classified into seven historical periods on the basis of style, technique and

superimposition, though the textbook discusses only the first three: Period I Upper Palaeolithic, Period II Mesolithic and Period III Chalcolithic (NCERT §p. 3).

NCERT then describes each period in vivid detail. Upper Palaeolithic paintings at Bhimbetka are linear representations in green and dark red, depicting huge animals such as bisons, elephants, tigers, rhinos and boars, alongside stick-like humans, with bodies often filled with geometric patterns. NCERT specifies a colour-subject code that CUET often tests: green paintings depict dancers, red paintings depict hunters (NCERT §Upper Palaeolithic, p. 3–4). The Mesolithic period — Period II — produced the largest number of paintings, though the individual works are smaller in scale. Themes are multiple, but hunting scenes predominate, with barbed spears, pointed sticks, arrows, bows, traps and snares depicted along with a much wider range of animals: elephant, bison, tiger, boar, deer, antelope, leopard, panther, rhinoceros, fish, frog, lizard, squirrel and birds (NCERT §Mesolithic, p. 4).

A second crucial NCERT generalisation, often tested, is the stylistic asymmetry of Mesolithic Bhimbetka: animals are painted naturalistically, humans are painted stylistically (NCERT §p. 4). Women appear both nude and clothed; children are shown running, jumping and playing; community dances are common; and hand prints, fist prints and finger-tip dot impressions are found alongside the painted compositions. The Chalcolithic period (Period III) sees the artists of Bhimbetka in contact with agricultural settlements on the Malwa plateau, with cross-influences visible in motifs and pottery design.

NCERT closes with technical and material details. Bhimbetka artists used a remarkably rich palette — white, yellow, orange, red ochre, purple, brown, green and black — but white and red were favourites. The red came from haematite, locally called geru; green came from a green variety of stone called chalcedony; and white was possibly derived from limestone (NCERT §p. 4–5). Pigments were ground, mixed with water and a sticky binder such as animal fat, gum or resin, and applied with brushes of plant fibre. The colours have survived thousands of years of adverse weather because of a chemical reaction between the pigments and the oxide on the surface of the rocks — a single sentence on NCERT page 5 that has appeared as an Assertion–Reason question in multiple CUET papers. NCERT also notes that some paintings are positioned in high or uncomfortable spots on walls and ceilings, suggesting they were either meant to be seen from a distance or had ritual significance, and that some places have as many as twenty superimposed layers, indicating that certain rock-shelters were sacred sites returned to by generation after generation (NCERT §p. 5, 7).

2.2 Definitions to memorise

Term	Definition	Page
Palaeolithic Age	Old Stone Age — the early phase of human prehistoric development	1
Upper Palaeolithic	Final phase of the Old Stone Age; first proliferation of art globally	1

Term	Definition	Page
Mesolithic	Middle Stone Age; produced the largest number of Bhimbetka paintings	4
Chalcolithic	Copper-Stone Age; Bhimbetka Period III, contact with Malwa farmers	3
Lakhudiyar	Rock-shelter site on River Suyal, Uttarakhand; name means "one lakh caves"	2
Superimposition	Practice of painting a new image over an older one on the same rock surface	2, 7
Haematite (geru)	Iron-oxide mineral source of red colour for prehistoric paintings	4
Chalcedony	Green variety of stone used as the source of green pigment	4
Limestone	Probable source of white pigment at Bhimbetka	4
Bhimbetka	Largest rock-shelter site (10 sq km, ~800 shelters, ~500 painted), 45 km south of Bhopal, MP	3
Period I / II / III	Bhimbetka's Upper Palaeolithic / Mesolithic / Chalcolithic phases	3
Wash painting	Painting made with diluted pigment rather than solid filled colour	3–4
Linear representation	Drawing technique using outline rather than mass-modelling	3–4
Stick figure	Reduced, schematic human image typical of Lakhudiyar and Bhimbetka	2, 4
Naturalistic depiction	Lifelike rendering, used at Bhimbetka for animals	4
Stylistic depiction	Conventionalised rendering, used at Bhimbetka for humans	4
Geometric pattern	Repeating shapes (wavy lines, dots, grids) found at Lakhudiyar and Bhimbetka	2, 3
Hand-print/fist-print	Direct hand impressions found among Mesolithic Bhimbetka images	4
Rock-shelter	Natural overhang of rock used by prehistoric humans for habitation and art	2–7
Archibold Carlleyle	British archaeologist who discovered Indian rock paintings in 1867–68	2
V. S. Wakankar	Archaeologist who discovered Bhimbetka in 1957–58	3
Geru	Hindi/regional term for haematite-derived red ochre	4
Pigment binder	Animal fat, gum or resin used to fix prehistoric pigments	5
Plant-fibre brush	Earliest known Indian painting instrument	5
Sacred shelter	NCERT's interpretation for caves with up to 20 superimposed layers	7

2.3 Diagrams / processes to remember

NCERT supports the text with a series of visuals that CUET regularly draws on for image-based identification questions. The opening map of prehistoric sites in India locates painting and engraving sites including Bhimbetka, Pachmarhi, Mirzapur, Raigarh, Bellary and Edakal Cave; candidates should be able to associate at least four of these names with their states. The Lakhudiyar plate of hand-linked dancing figures (p. 2) is one of the most frequently reproduced prehistoric images in Indian textbooks, and pairs with the wavy-line geometric design plate immediately following it. A photograph of the cave entrance at Bhimbetka (p. 3) anchors the site geographically and is paired with an Upper Palaeolithic linear-figure plate of animals filled with geometric patterns flanking stick-figure humans.

For the Mesolithic period, NCERT reproduces a striking single-animal study from Bhimbetka (p. 4) that demonstrates the naturalistic animal style; and on page 5 a painting showing a man being hunted by a beast — note how the animal is exaggerated in size relative to the man, a stylistic device that students should be ready to interpret in an MCQ. The two-page "plate spread" (p. 6) shows a Hunting Scene of a group hunting a bison with injured men scattered on the ground, and a Dancing Scene of hand-linked figures echoing the earlier Lakhudiyar composition. The process of making a painting at Bhimbetka can be summarised in five steps for CUET memorisation: (1) collect mineral colour — haematite for red, chalcedony for green, limestone for white; (2) grind the mineral to a fine powder; (3) mix with water and a sticky binder of animal fat, plant gum or natural resin; (4) apply with a plant-fibre brush onto the dry rock surface; (5) the pigment then chemically bonds with the oxide layer of the rock, which is why the colours survived. Candidates should also recall the Lakhudiyar superimposition sequence visually — black at the bottom, red ochre middle, white on top — and the Bhimbetka three-period scheme: Upper Palaeolithic linear bichrome → Mesolithic small detailed hunting scenes → Chalcolithic interaction with Malwa farming motifs.

2.4 Common confusions / NTA trap points

- Discoverer dates: Carlleyle discovered Indian rock paintings in **1867–68**, twelve years **before** Altamira (1879); Bhimbetka was discovered in **1957–58** by **V. S. Wakankar**. NTA frequently swaps these two dates or swaps the discoverers.
- Superimposition order at Lakhudiyar: earliest **black** → middle **red ochre** → latest **white**. NTA often reverses the sequence to "white earliest, black latest."
- Bhimbetka periods discussed in NCERT = only the **first three** (Upper Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Chalcolithic). Watch for trap options claiming the book covers "all seven."
- Colour sources: red from **haematite**, green from **chalcedony**, white possibly from **limestone**. NTA loves to swap "chalcedony" with "malachite" or "limestone" with "kaolin."
- Upper Palaeolithic colour-subject code: **green = dancers, red = hunters** — not the reverse.

- Animals are painted **naturalistically**, humans **stylistically** — a classic statement-based trap (NCERT p. 4).
- Lakhudiyar's name means **"one lakh caves,"** not "one lakh paintings."
- The Mesolithic period at Bhimbetka has the **largest number** of paintings, but each painting is **smaller in size** than the Upper Palaeolithic.
- "First discovery of rock paintings in India" refers to **Carlleyle's 1867–68 work**, not Wakankar's Bhimbetka work.
- Subjects at Karnataka–AP Neolithic sites include **stylised humans and tridents**; vegetal motifs are **rare** — not absent, but rare.
- Pigments were bound with **animal fat, gum or resin**, not with egg yolk (egg yolk is a European tempera binder — a classic NTA distractor).
- The Bhimbetka colours survived because of **oxide chemical reaction** on the rock surface, not because of climatic dryness.

2.5 Key artworks / artists

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Archibold Carlleyle	1867–68 (discovery)	First documented Indian rock paintings, predating Altamira	2
Cockburn	Late 19th c. (discovery)	Early surveyor of central Indian rock-shelters	2
Anderson	Late 19th c. (discovery)	Early surveyor of prehistoric Indian art	2
Mitra	Early 20th c. (discovery)	Indian pioneer in prehistoric rock-art studies	2
Ghosh	20th c. (discovery)	Early scholar of Indian rock paintings	2
V. S. Wakankar	1957–58 (discovery)	Discovered Bhimbetka rock-shelters	3
Hand-linked dancing figures, Lakhudiyar	Prehistoric, Uttarakhand	Earliest known Indian community-dance image	2
Wavy-line geometric design, Lakhudiyar	Prehistoric	Demonstrates abstract motif tradition	2
Long-snouted animal, Lakhudiyar	Prehistoric	Iconic Lakhudiyar fauna depiction	2
Upper Palaeolithic linear figures, Bhimbetka	Period I	Bichrome (green and dark red) large-animal panels	3–4
"Single animal" study, Bhimbetka	Mesolithic, Period II	Demonstrates naturalistic animal style	4

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Man hunted by beast, Bhimbetka	Mesolithic, Period II	Shows exaggerated scale for narrative drama	5
Hunting Scene plate, Bhimbetka	Mesolithic	Group hunting a bison with injured men	6
Dancing Scene plate, Bhimbetka	Mesolithic	Hand-linked dancers paralleling Lakhudiyar	6
Kupgallu paintings	Neolithic / late historic	Granite rock-shelter, southern Deccan tradition	2–3
Piklihal paintings	Neolithic / early historic	Bulls, sambhars, stylised humans on granite	2–3
Tekkalkota paintings	Neolithic	Tridents, herd animals, southern style	2–3
Pachmarhi rock paintings	Prehistoric, MP	Subsidiary Vindhya site shown on map	front map
Mirzapur rock paintings	Prehistoric, UP	Kaimurean extension site	front map, 2
Edakal Cave engravings	Prehistoric, Kerala	Southernmost site on NCERT map	front map

🎯 Practice MCQs

📊 PYQ Alignment

This chapter is a regular CUET Fine Arts (312) feature, with 4–6 MCQs typically asked each year from prehistoric sites, periods, discoverers, pigment sources, and the Lakhudiyar/Bhimbetka contrasts. NTA favours direct factual recall (dates, discoverers, site-region matches) and statement-based questions on superimposition order, colour materials, and Upper Palaeolithic vs Mesolithic distinctions. CUET 2023 included an Assertion-Reason on pigment survival; CUET 2024 carried a match-the-following on the Karnataka Neolithic sites; CUET 2025 used an image-based question identifying the Lakhudiyar dance scene. Candidates should be confident with all six core facts: Carlleyle 1867–68, Wakankar 1957–58, Bhimbetka 800/500, three Bhimbetka periods discussed of seven total, haematite/chalcedony/limestone, and the green-dancers / red-hunters colour code.