

Gupta Artistic Tradition in the Reign of Kumāragupta I Mahendrāditya, 414-456 A.D.

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The freshness and vitality of classical Indian art and architecture are due in no small measure to the reign of the Gupta dynasty (200-600 AD). Under these benevolent kings India's artists and architects found creative freedom within religious tradition, resulting in some of the most beautiful art that ever testified to the glory of the divine. It is in the reign of Kumāragupta I Mahendrāditya (414-456 AD) that the essence of Gupta art reached its pinnacle. Architectural mores were revised and expanded to create the classic form of Temple 17 and the richly decorated Daśāvātāra temple at Deogaṛh. Sculpture in stone and terracotta media found a new quality of expression, conveying a real sense of introspection and serenity in Buddha figures such as those from Mathurā and Sarnāth, and a sophisticated interpretation of complicated Brahmanical subjects. The architecture, sculpture, coins and pillars of Kumāragupta I's reign all bear witness to the exceptional standard aspired to and maintained by the creative community under his rule.

The Gupta period has been described as "one of cultured opulence resulting in an outpouring of science, visual art, music, and literature."¹ Much of this cultural creativity was due to liberal patronage of the arts by private citizens, guilds, and royalty, all seeking to assure their niche in heaven.² From their capital at Paliputra Gupta kings diverted revenue from land taxes towards the promotion of the arts and maintenance of public works such as *ṛddhapāna* (royal highways) and *nagara paraka* (city gardens)³; they crystallized the *kāvyā* style of literature, codified and systemised the *śāstras*, or the canons of Indian art, and created an environment of religious tolerance.⁴ This tolerance is evident from the contemporaneous production of both Buddhist and Hindu art throughout the Gupta period. Although Gupta kings were traditionally devotees of Viṣṇu and Śiva in an age when the cult figure held sway, they respected Buddhism, giving Buddhist religious and artistic communities unrestricted support.⁵ Perhaps the most far-reaching achievement of the Gupta period was to "give each character in mythology, whether Buddhist or Brahmanical, certain conventional attitudes and symbolical gestures".⁶ This iconographical system formed the basis for artistic expression in India for centuries. However, images were never intended to be mere effigies. Their purpose was to make visible the world of truth.⁷

It is in the reign of Kumāragupta I Mahendrāditya, from 414-456 AD, that the Gupta empire reached the zenith of power and splendour, which spread across the whole of India and beyond.⁸ His relatively peaceful reign allowed an unprecedented outpouring of creative energy reflected in the many artistic endeavors still extant from the period. The

¹Roy Craven, *A Concise History of Indian Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 111.

²Stella Kramrich, *The Art of India: Traditions of Indian Sculpture, Painting and Architecture*, 3rd ed. (London: Phaidon Press, 1963), p. 37; Vincent A. Smith, *A History of Fine art in India and Ceylon: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), p. 159.

³Xinru Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges AD 1-600* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 39; R.N. Dandekar, *The Age of the Guptas and Other Essays* (Delhi: Ajanta, 1982), p. 27.

⁴Radhakamal Mukerjee, *The Cosmic Art of India* (Bombay: Allied, 1965), p. 31.

⁵Chintamani Kar, *Classical Indian Sculpture, 300 BC to AD 500* (London: Alec Tiranti, 1956), p. 24.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷George Michell, *The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to its Meanings and Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 20.

⁸Mukerjee, *Cosmic Art of India*, p. 75.

extent of Kumāragupta I's power is well recorded in the thirteen inscriptions and many coins recovered across a vast tract of India as far as Ahmadabad and Bhaunagar. The spirit of religious tolerance characteristic of Gupta kings was fostered by Kumāragupta I; although a staunch *bhagavata*, he performed the Vedic *āsvamedha* sacrifice and encouraged the execution of many exquisite Buddhist artworks.⁹ In addition, there are records of Kumāragupta I's *agrahāra*, or philanthropy towards Buddhist religious communities; for example, he made provision for a Buddhist almshouse to be maintained on the interest accrued by twelve *dīnāras* he deposited with a guildhouse.¹⁰

The architectural innovations which took place during the reign of Kumāragupta I were unprecedented in the history of Indian art. By the fifth century, the Vedic altar of piled bricks had evolved; "the altar form of the architectural ritual, repeated and elaborated in its layers so that the effect is increased and the meaning intensified, was subsequently embodied in the religious monuments that were built by architects".¹¹ Dressed stone masonry was introduced for the first time during the Gupta era; several exemplary temples of this type are to be found in Kumāragupta I's reign, for example the Daśāvātāra temple at Deogaṛh and Temple 17 at Sañci. Brick continued to be utilised as a construction material, however, as is illustrated by the temple at Bhītārgāon. It is interesting to note that the tradition of ascribing certain materials for particular purposes continued into this period. Brick continued as the

substance for a sacrificial altar; wood continued to denote the World Tree; and stone symbolized the mountain.

From a purely structural point of view, the most innovative architectural transition of the free-standing temple occurred during the reign of Kumāragupta I. The Hindu cella-and-porch began to be raised on a *medhi*, or broad platform, like a Buddhist *stūpa*. Steps on one or all four sides led up to the temple proper. The *pradakṣiṇāpatha*, delightfully described by Goetz as a "covered circulatory passage around the shrine",¹² was instituted, being either a corridor set with windows or a pillar hall. Corbelled vaults remained the norm in predominantly Hindu temples, maintaining the confined interior space which gave rise to the term *garbhagrha*, or "womb-house", when describing such temples.¹³ The Hindu temple and Buddhist *stūpa* were both interpreted as a microcosm of the world, with the cella representing the cave where the image of the deity was concealed, and the superstructure representing Mount Meru.¹⁴

The Buddhist rock-cut *caitya*-hall and *vihāra* also underwent extensive changes during the Gupta era, best exemplified during the reign of Kumāragupta I. The *caitya*-hall developed into a free-standing structure¹⁵, traces of which can be detected in the plan of a ruined temple at Sañci with reconstructed pillars. The *vihāra* underwent a more functional change, from housing and feeding monks to an established place of worship.¹⁶ This is not to say, however, that *caitya*-hall type temples were limited to Buddhist use and cella-and-

⁹R.C. Majumdar and A.S. Altekar, eds, *The Vākātaka-Gupta Age (cir. 200-550 AD)* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1960), p. 367.

¹⁰Sachindra Kumar Maity, *Economic Life of Northern India in the Gupta Period (cir. AD 300-550)* (Calcutta: World Press, 1957), p. 159.

¹¹Kramrich, *Art of India*, p. 16.

¹²Hermann Goetz, *The Art of India: Five Thousand Years of Indian Art* (New York: Crown, 1959), p. 92.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁵Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 218-219.

¹⁶Craven, *Concise History of Indian Art*, p. 123.

porch types were used exclusively by Hindu sects; indeed, both temples and *stūpas* share a number of common architectural design elements in the fifth century AD.¹⁷

A Buddhist feature borrowed by Hindu architectural ornamentation was the modification of *yaksas*, like those found on Buddhist balustrade pillars, to small *mithuna* groups. Buddhist *stūpas* begin including friezes of *kalpalatā*, or scrollwork, like that found on the Daśavatāra temple doorway as ornamentation. In terms of future trends, the earliest true arch found in India is incorporated into the brick temple at Bhītārgāon, whilst a *śikbara*, or spire, rising forty feet in the air is known to have once topped the Daśavatāra temple at Deogaṛh - singular in a period otherwise renowned for its standard *bhūmikā*, or flat stone-slab roof. Experts are divided as to whether this was a natural progression from the *stūpa*, or an adaptation from beehive huts, or a representation of the *mukaṭa*, the towering headdress of Viṣṇu. The *śikbara* later became a standard feature of Hindu temples, and it is proof of the architectural creativity expressed during the reign of Kumāragupta I that it first makes its appearance under his rule. The cella-and-porch temple construction is perfectly presented in a small temple at Sañci known as Temple 17, dated at c.415 AD. The square *garbhagrha*, or sanctuary, is preceded by a *mandapa*, or columned portico, which became a standard plan for later temple-building in India. The *garbhagrha-mandapa* rests on a *medhi* with steps at either end of the porch; the *bhūmikā*, or flat stone-slab roof, is practically equipped with spouts to drain rainwater away. The columns of the portico, which assist in lending an almost Hellenistic quality to the temple, reinforce its sophisticated simplicity by their restrained ornamentation. A modification of the Aśokan order, the columns rise from heavy, square bases to octagonal shafts topped by bell capitals and a large square carved with leogryphs placed back to back. Although it seems fairly certain that the shrine once housed a Hindu image, the temple has the essential features of both Buddhist and Hindu architecture, demonstrating the two-way flow of ideas occurring in the artistic community.¹⁸

Rowland describes the Daśavatāra temple at Deogaṛh as "one of the most ornate and beautifully composed examples of Gupta architecture".¹⁹ Dated at 425 AD, the temple exhibits many of the same characteristics as Temple 17, although its design is more innovative. The temple is composed of nine equal squares, the *garbhagrha* occupying the innermost position. Originally each wall of the *garbhagrha* was preceded by four columns, placed so as to allow access to the three niches of bas-relief sculpture depicting *Viṣṇu Anantaśayin*, the *Gajendramokṣa* episode, and Viṣṇu as an ascetic.²⁰ The space created between the cella proper and the columns would thus have compromised a *pradakṣiṇāpatha*. The *medhi*, decorated with events from the Rāmāyāna, is approached by four sets of stairs. Unlike the flat roof of Temple 17, the Daśavatāra temple was originally topped by a forty-foot *śikbara* set with *caitya*-arches.²¹ The sculpted columns framing the niches and doorway have been modified from the Aśokan-inspired type seen at Temple 17; they are alternately square, octagonal and sixteen-sided, decorated with scrollwork and lion heads. The doorway is an early example of the ornately decorated type which first made its appearance during the reign of Kumāragupta I, its pilastres supporting an architrave similar to a *caitya*-hall roof, ornamented with *caitya* dormers and narrow vertical bands of decoration comprised of *mithunas*. In the centre of the door is a slab depicting Viṣṇu on the great Nāga; on either side are reliefs of the river goddesses of the Ganges and Jumna rivers, while at the

¹⁷Michell, *Hindu Temple*, p. 96.

¹⁸Susan Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain* (New York: Weather Hill, 1985), p. 200.

¹⁹Rowland, *Art and Architecture of India*, p. 224.

²⁰Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1972), p. 80.

²¹*Ibid.*

base of the superimposed doorframes are carvings of *dvārapālas* (door guardians) and female divinities.²²

At the Sūrya Narayana temple at Lādh Khān, c. 437 AD, the *pradakṣiṇāpatha* is enclosed by walls set with stone grilles on two sides. The rectangular shape of the temple is reminiscent of a Buddhist *caitya*-hall or a *santhaghāra* (village meeting hall). The temple, dedicated to the sun god, was built by a guild of silk weavers who appear to have immigrated from Lāta-viṣaya to Dekhan, attracted by the virtues of the kings in that area.²³ This may explain the temple's lack of adherence to pre-existing temple design; the actual shrine for the image of the deity is placed at the rear of the temple in a separate room. The square cella of the Daśāvatāra temple has here been superimposed by the columned portico of Temple 17; other features similar to the Daśāvatāra temple include the depiction of river goddesses on the columns, and niches decorated with bas-relief, although here they are projected, not recessed.²⁴ The use of perforated

stone slabs to admit light is an extremely innovative technique which would come to play a major role in Moslem architecture of following centuries.

The temple at Bhītārgāon differs from others constructed in the period 414-456 AD in that it is comprised of brick, not stone slabs. Here the idea of hiding an image in the heart of the mountain is reinforced by the overall shape of the temple. An amazing variety of architectural innovations are seen in this temple; the square cella is enclosed within a superstructure doubly recessed to form a rosette-shaped perimetre. Double cornices and a recessed frieze of carved brick support a pyramid-shaped roof with tiers of horizontal *caitya*-arches, while domed brick vaults cover the cella-and-porch arrangement. Although the original *caitya*-style roof has crumbled, the superstructure is still arresting. In addition to panels of carved terracotta Brahmanical subjects of exquisite workmanship, decoration is provided by way of *gavakṣya*-niches, where the heads of divine beings are enframed by blind *caitya*-arches. This temple boasts the earliest use of *gavakṣya*-niches, which later became one of the prevailing motifs in the pre-Khmer art of Indochina.²⁵

It is almost impossible to separate architecture and sculpture in the period 414-456. As Coomaraswamy remarks,

the image has taken its place in architecture; becoming necessary, it loses its importance, and enters into the general decorative scheme, and in this integration acquires delicacy and repose."²⁶

This is particularly true of Hindu sculpture; the Daśāvatāra temple at Deogaṛh would lack visual impact without the sculptured niches, the ornately carved doorway or the bas-relief pediment depicting the Rāmāyāna, whilst these sculptures could not have found a more suitable environment to set them off than the dressed stone slabs. The sculptural space is full of vitality without frenzy here; the Buddhist sculptural style of Sarnāth has been adapted to the Hindu motif.²⁷ The panel depicting *Viṣṇu Anantasayin* captures the serenity of expression seen in the sculpture of the Buddha Preaching the Law at Mathurā. Attributes of Viṣṇu, represented naturally in the Kuṣan period, are here shown personified as *āyudha-puruṣas* as can be seen at the bottom of the panel. In addition, the stocky style of the Kuṣan

²²Rowland, *Art and Architecture of India*, p. 225.

²³Radhagovinda Basak, *The History of North-Eastern India: Extending from the Foundation of the Gupta Empire to the Rise of the Pāla Dynasty of Bengal (c. AD320-760)* (Calcutta: Sambodhi, 1967), p. 59.

²⁴Coomaraswamy, *Indian and Indonesian Art*, p. 79.

²⁵Rowland, *Art and Architecture of India*, p. 127.

²⁶Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesia Art*, p. 71.

²⁷Mukerjee, *Cosmic Art of India*, p. 50.

has given way to more sensual delineations, as can be seen in the bas-relief sculpture depicting Kṛṣṇa at his birth and the Daśāvātāra panels. The position of the body in sculpture owes much to *bhārat nāṭyan* dance, in which gestures and poses convey meaning.²⁸ Iconographical canons, guidelines for which had been loosely developing for centuries, were formalised in the fifth century, leaving a lasting heritage for future artists. Thus a lion-like body came to represent physical strength; long arms became a mark of noble birth;²⁹ squat, large-bellied figures indicated menial and inferior characters; a king or prince would have a nimbus as a symbol of divine descent, as would a divine being.³⁰ Accoutrements of the gods also became standardised; a club meaning physical power, a lotus symbolising growth, a disc meaning time, a conch representing space and sound, to say nothing of the Buddha-*mūdras*.³¹

While Hindu sculpture became charged with holy power, Buddha images evolved into configurations of silence.³² It is the tranquillity and grace of Buddha images in the reign of Kumāragupta I which has caused future generations of artists to seize upon them as ideals. The only example in this period of the Kuṣān type of Buddha, with shaven head, is the Mankuwār. The webbed fingers of this Buddha, signifying divinity, are typical of the Gupta artistic tradition, and are also found in other Buddha figures between 414-456. Refinement and definition of facial expression are perhaps the most distinctive characteristics of Buddhist sculpture in this period, as can be seen in the Buddha Preaching the Law from Mathurā. The small head atop the slim body accentuates the height of the figure; the expression is gentle and transcendent; the nimbus is rich and concise in definition. Goetz describes Buddha figures of this period as "sustained by a real spirituality, a will to help and enlighten, inspired by a mind which has understood the basic evils of the world and feels endless compassion for the miseries of all living beings".³³ Curly hair is a feature of Buddhas during the reign of Kumāragupta I, in contrast to earlier Kuṣān Buddhas. Elaborately decorated nimbuses and absence of *ūrṇās* were also typical of this period. The treatment of the robe at this time is quite innovative; the completely diaphanous robe covering the torso of the standing Buddha from Sarnāth, the lineated folds clinging to the Buddha Preaching the Law from Sarnāth, and the transparent garment of the seated Buddha from Mathurā - visible only by suggestions of hemlines - are all variations on a theme which reconciled the north-western style of garment depiction with the Indic love of the human form.³⁴ In a development parallel to Hindu iconography, it was during Kumāragupta I's reign that alterations to Stūpa I at Sañci instituted typical Mahāyāna forms.³⁵ A greater variation of *mūdras* is also discernible in this period; for example, the headless image of Buddha from Sarnāth shows the gesture expressing the "wheel of the law", or the first preaching. Another classic feature of Gupta art is the inclusion of miniature figures, sometimes of donors, on the base of Buddha sculptures; this is exemplified in the seated Buddha from Mathurā shown preaching the law. The long arms and absence of musculature typical of Hindu deities has clearly been adapted to Buddhist images, as can be seen in the Bodhisattva torso from Sañci.

Stone was not the only medium of sculptural expression during the reign of Kumāragupta I. Temples such as Bhītārgāon had panels of terracotta carvings, counterparts of the sculpted panels in dressed stone temples such as Daśāvātāra at Deogaṛh. If nothing

²⁸Goetz, *Art of India*, p. 105.

²⁹E.B. Havell, *The Ideals of Indian Art*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1920), p. 26.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 48.

³¹Goetz, *Cosmic Art of India*, p. 103.

³²Kramrich, *Art of India*, p. 108.

³³Goetz, *Cosmic Art of India*, p. 108.

³⁴Huntington, *Art of Ancient India*, p. 200.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 197.

else, the terracotta reliefs of minor temples demonstrate that Gupta artists were adept at quickly fashioning lively figures when not constrained by the ideals of court society.³⁶ Similarly, "poor man's sculpture" in the terracotta medium popularised art and culture, spreading concepts via easily mass-produced moulded figurines, beads, necklaces, and earrings.³⁷ Despite the more secular appeal of terracotta art, iconographic canons continued to be observed:

The forms of gods, who also, like human beings, acquired divine powers by ascetic practices, were nevertheless not to be represented like the human ascetic with bodies emaciated by hunger and thirst, bones protruding, and swollen veins, but with smooth skin, rounded limbs, the veins and bones always concealed, the neck and shoulders massive and strong, and the waist narrow, like the body of a lion.³⁸

An extract from a terracotta panel in Uttar Pradesh clearly depicts Rāvaṇa as a lion-like figure, in spite of the fact that he is in disguise. This lion-like ideal is also observed in a terracotta featuring Viṣṇu on a Garuda, and in one comprised of Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. By contrast, a terracotta of an ascetic from the same region exhibits the classic emaciation of the type.

Painting was a standard feature of an upper-class education throughout the Gupta era, and every home of good standing contained murals and panel pictures.³⁹ Indian literature written after the Maurya period makes frequent reference to painting, whilst the *Viṣṇudharmottaram* was on hand to stipulate which kinds of paintings were appropriate in different settings.⁴⁰ Sculptural and architectural edifices were covered with thin plaster and coloured; walls of temples and palaces were decorated inside and out with pictures.⁴¹ As with sculpture, an understanding of painting requires an understanding of dance, or *nṛtya-śāstra*.⁴² Unfortunately, there are no reliably dated paintings from the period 414-456 AD, although it has been suggested that at least some of the Cave XVII paintings at Ajanta date from the mid-fifth century.

However, given the state of perfection attained in all other artistic endeavours during Kumāragupta I's reign, it is fairly safe to surmise that painting also reached an unprecedented high standard in this period.

Coins have provided a wealth of information about Kumāragupta I. The extent of his influence is obvious from the vast area across which gold, silver and copper coins bearing his likeness and name have been found. Yet, more than a historical record, the coins provide still more proof of the mastery of artistic expression pre-eminent in Kumāragupta I's reign. The linear definition seen in sculpture translated to coin, as did iconographical canons. The king is depicted with the long arms and lion-like body of the ideal form, while the nimbus surrounding his head symbolizes the divine descent claimed by the Gupta dynasty.⁴³ A great variation of subject is seen in Kumāragupta I's gold coins; types include Archer, Swordsman, Lion-slayer, Tiger-slayer, Peacock, Pratāpa, and the Elephant-rider. Hindu deities making an appearance include Lakṣmī and Kārttikeya, with appropriate accoutrements. Despite Smith's assertion that "after A.D. 400 no Hindu coin is

³⁶Goetz, *Cosmic Art of India*, p. 105.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸Havell, *Ideals of Indian Art*, p. 31.

³⁹Goetz, *Cosmic Art of India*, p. 109.

⁴⁰Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, p. 87.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴³Havell, *Ideals of Indian Art*, p. 48.

worthy of mention in a history of art",⁴⁴ the elegant simplicity and subtle subject variation of his coinage reinforce the contention that Kumāragupta I was indeed the facilitator of a truly great artistic tradition.

A more obscure avenue of expression, that of erecting pillars to commemorate great deeds or holy sites, was revived periodically during the Gupta era. Originally an Aśokan custom, these monumental columns have largely disappeared as a result of vandalism through the centuries.⁴⁵ One remaining pillar from Kumāragupta I's reign is the Iron Pillar of Delhi, set up in 415 AD in honour of Kumāragupta I's father, Candragupta II. Made of pure malleable iron, standing over twenty-three and a half feet in height, and with a diameter of over sixteen inches, the column weighs over six tonnes and probably originally stood on an eminence at Mathurā.⁴⁶ Another column is the Bhitārī stone pillar. Dated at 456 AD, the monolithic stone column commemorates prince Skandagupta's victory over the Puṣyamitras who were invading Kumāragupta I's kingdom.⁴⁷

An ancient Sanskrit proverb attributed to Viṣṇu-Sarma says that "a man should try to obtain what he hath not; having obtained it he should keep it with care; what hath been preserved he should increase, and being increased he should give it away at places of holy visitation."⁴⁸ During his reign, Kumāragupta I ensured that art and architecture attained an unprecedented level of refinement and sophistication through patronage and state financing. He secured the iconographical traditions of previous centuries in artistic canons for future generations of artists. The cultural conditions engendered by his benevolence and love of the arts made it possible for great quantities of art and architecture to be produced and spread across the breadth of India and beyond, into Cambodia, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Most importantly, the environment of religious tolerance fostered by Kumāragupta I enabled both Hindu and Buddhist artists and architects to flourish simultaneously, each absorbing concepts from the other. In the words of Mukerjee, the art and architecture of the period 414-456

with its newly acquired certitude in respect of iconic conventions and mastery of artistic forms, handled both Brahmanical metaphysical myths and Buddhist legends and miracles with supreme clarity and vigour and obliterated in its serene and suprasensible images the distinctions between the Buddha, Śiva, Viṣṇu and Tirthamkara.⁴⁹

⁴⁴Smith, *History of Fine Art*, p. 352.

⁴⁵Kar, *Classical Indian Sculpture*, p. 23.

⁴⁶Smith, *History of Fine Art*, p. 352.

⁴⁷Huntington, *Art of Ancient India*, p. 174.

⁴⁸Viṣṇu-Sarma?, *The Hitopadesa: Fables and Proverbs*, trans. Charles Wilkins (London: Routledge, 1885), p. 101.

⁴⁹Mukerjee, *Cosmic Art of India*, p. 31.

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