

Paintings of Ajanta and Dambulla – A Discussion of the Themes

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The Buddhist art depict Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other entities; notable Buddhist figures, both historical and mythical; narrative scenes from the life of Buddha, along with mandalas and other graphic aids to practice; as well as physical objects associated with Buddhist practice, such as *vajras*, bells, stupas and Buddhist temple architecture. Buddhist art originated on the Indian subcontinent following the historical life of Gautama Buddha, and thereafter evolved by contact with other cultures as it spread throughout Asia and the world. The Ajanta frescos scattered in the caves along the Waghora River date from the second century B.C., when the first Buddhists forbade representation of the Buddha himself. The subject-matter of the paintings of Ajanta are mostly the various lives of the Buddha as told in the *Jataka* tales. Buddhist art followed believers as the dharma spread, adapted, and evolved in the Asian countries. It developed to the north through Central Asia and into Eastern Asia to form the Northern branch of Buddhist art, and to the east as far as Southeast Asia to form the Southern branch of Buddhist art. The five caves at Dambulla converted into shrine rooms and within these rooms is housed a collection of one hundred and fifty statues of Buddha, and several more deities along with other personages of the Buddhist order of Sri Lanka. The uniqueness of this site lies in the fact that along with paintings on the walls there are also painted sculptures with a unique style, colour, composition and a range of themes depicting the life and teachings of Buddha.

The present paper proposes to explore some themes of Buddhist paintings in India and Sri Lanka with reference to paintings at Ajanta and Dambulla.

Keywords: India-Sri Lanka, Ajanta, Dambulla, Buddhist Painting Tradition, Themes

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