

The Symbolism of the 'Elephant' in Asokan Art

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ABSTRACT

A symbol is an artistic device or a sign used to convey information visually, through forms and shapes, thus eliminating the barriers of language. Symbolism is also a device or a language used to convey information visually, through forms and shapes, thus eliminating the barriers of language. The main difference in symbol and symbolism is that symbols are generally universal whereas only those who follow or understand that tenet of religion can comprehend the symbolism used in those structural edifices.

Thus though elephant has been used as a decorative element in early art, the symbolism of the elephant is unique and is understood only with reference to the life and teachings of the Buddha.

3rd BCE Asokan art or the Mauryan court art is the archaeological evidence of the earliest Buddhist art of India. Nowhere else are there engravings of the four animals, Lion, Bull, Horse and Elephant except on the pillar capitals of the Asokan pillars where the symbolic representation of the four important events of the life of the Buddha and the Buddha himself are represented. The places where these pillars are placed and the messages they convey are clear evidence of symbolism.

This paper will take into consideration the pillar capital of the Sankisa popularly called the 'Elephant capital', the 'Elephant in motion' from the Sarnath pillar capital, the '*gajotama*' engraved on the major rock inscription of the Kalsi and the 'Emerging Elephant' seen at the Dhauri major rock inscription to understand the symbolism used by the emperor Asoka. The 'elephant motif' in the Mauryan coins will also be discussed to understand the symbolism.

The paper discusses why the elephant has been used in these pillar and rock inscriptions by the emperor. What is the symbolic meaning of the elephant with reference to the teachings of the Buddha and what is the message conveyed through this art? How has the Mauryan art influenced the Buddhist art of India and abroad. Is there a necessity to know the life and teachings of Buddha to understand the Asokan Art?

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