Art, Architecture, and Empire

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Introduction

This book follows the long arc by which images, buildings, and cities in South Asia were made to speak the languages of power, piety, and profit. From the polished sandstone of Ashokan pillars to the marble translucencies of Mughal palaces and the gridded maps of colonial urbanism, visual culture both reflected and remade political worlds. Rather than treating monuments as isolated masterworks, we read them as arguments in stone, brick, bronze, and paper—claims about who rules, what is sacred, and how communities imagine themselves across time.

Our scope is deliberately wide. It begins in the third century BCE, when the Mauryan empire experimented with a new, imperial public art and a novel technology of governance through edicts. It then follows monastic networks that stitched together stupas, caves, and reliquaries; the cosmopolitan frontier of Gandhara where Hellenistic and Indic forms recast the human figure; and the classicizing temper of Gupta ateliers that standardized canons even as they enabled regional styles. We move through the efflorescence of temple architectures in both Nagara and Dravida idioms, the processional life of Chola bronzes, and the scholarly, tantric ecumenes of the Pala-Sena east that radiated to Sri Lanka and the Himalaya.

The story turns, too, on the arrival and indigenization of Persianate courts. Sultanate mosques, minarets, and khanqahs not only announced conquest but also seeded local craft ecologies, textual practices, and forms of urban sociability. The Mughals refined this repertoire into a language of empire—gardens that diagrammed cosmic order, palaces that choreographed ceremony, and paintings that curated global knowledge. Across these centuries, professionals of making—masons, carvers, calligraphers, metallurgists, painters, surveyors—translated visions of rule into material environments.

Empire, however, was never the whole story. Merchant guilds, pilgrimage associations, and artisan lineages also built and embellished; shrines, bazaars, caravanserais, and waterworks reveal publics beyond the court. Coastal ports on the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal connected Gujarat, the Deccan, and the Coromandel to East Africa, Arabia, and Southeast Asia, sending textiles, ideas, and motifs along with pepper and pearls. Himalayan regions—Kashmir, Nepal, Tibet—served as highland corridors where scripts, rituals, and aesthetics circulated across political borders, complicating any neat

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narrative of center and periphery.

The colonial centuries shifted both the scale and the instruments of visual power. Company forts and factories seeded new townscapes; surveys, archaeology, and museums reframed ruins as “heritage,” often to govern the living through the past. Revival styles such as the Indo-Saracenic constructed spectacles of benevolent rule even as railways, sanitary reform, and policing reorganized cities into segregated landscapes of work, leisure, and exclusion. Hill stations, cantonments, and new capitals like New Delhi demonstrate how planning, infrastructure, and ceremony fused to naturalize imperial hierarchy in space.

Methodologically, this book braids formal analysis with social history. We linger on proportions, plans, and iconographies, but also on quarries, timber lines, labor guilds, ritual calendars, and the logistics of moving stone, water, and people. We read inscriptions, chronicles, travelogues, and court albums alongside cadastral maps, photographs, and engineering reports. The wager is simple: when we pair style with patronage and infrastructure, monuments reappear not as static backdrops but as evolving platforms for innovation.

The chapters are arranged broadly chronologically while clustering around problems—pilgrimage and mobility; conquest and legitimation; garden-city visions; craft knowledge and technology; urban reform and surveillance. Each chapter anchors its argument in case studies—Sanchi and Sarnath, Ajanta and Ellora, Pattadakal and Thanjavur, the Qutb complex and Fatehpur Sikri, Lahore and Shahjahanabad, Calcutta and Bombay—while pointing to adjacent lands whose exchanges made South Asian art and architecture decisively transregional.

Readers will find, I hope, a visual history that is panoramic without sacrificing texture. If there is a central claim, it is that styles do not merely follow empires; they help to constitute them, giving political authority an image, a ritual, and a place. By tracing how patrons and practitioners forged worlds through form—from pillars to palaces to planned cities—we can better see how the built and pictured environment continues to shape the meanings of power, belief, and belonging.

CHAPTER ONE: Pillars of Rule: The Mauryan Age and Ashoka’s Visual Program

The third century BCE in South Asia witnessed the emergence of an empire of unprecedented scale and ambition: the Mauryan Empire. For the first time, a single political entity held sway over a vast swathe of the subcontinent, a development that

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inevitably led to a new kind of visual culture designed to project and legitimize this burgeoning imperial power. At the heart of this visual program stood the monolithic pillars of Emperor Ashoka, striking monuments that were simultaneously technological marvels, vehicles for royal pronouncements, and potent symbols of a new kind of moral and political authority. These pillars, often capped with magnificent animal sculptures, served as the most enduring and widely distributed artistic statements of the Mauryan state, articulating a vision of rule that was both grand and deeply ethical.

Before Ashoka, the concept of a pan-Indian empire, particularly one with a centralized administrative structure, was largely nascent. The preceding Mahajanapadas, or great states, were powerful regional kingdoms, but none had achieved the territorial reach of the Mauryans. The Mauryan dynasty, founded by Chandragupta Maurya, consolidated power through military conquest, eventually controlling territory stretching from present-day Afghanistan to Bengal and down into the Deccan. This vast dominion required new methods of communication and control, and it was Ashoka, Chandragupta's grandson, who fully embraced the power of public art to serve these imperial ends. His conversion to Buddhism after the Kalinga War profoundly reshaped the Mauryan visual agenda, transforming instruments of raw power into statements of *dhamma*, or righteous conduct.

The Mauryan capital, Pataliputra, near modern-day Patna, would have been an impressive urban center, though much of its material legacy is now lost. Accounts from Megasthenes, a Greek ambassador to Chandragupta's court, describe a city of immense proportions, enclosed by a wooden palisade with numerous towers and gates. While little remains of its grand palaces and civic structures, archaeological excavations have revealed traces of timber constructions, indicating a sophisticated urban planning and building tradition that likely employed perishable materials extensively. The scale of the city itself would have been a visual testament to Mauryan power, a bustling hub where diverse populations converged under imperial authority.

However, it is the Ashokan pillars, scattered across the Mauryan realm, that truly define the visual culture of this era. These weren't just markers; they were deliberate acts of monumentalization, each pillar a carefully crafted statement. Carved from a single block of sandstone, often quarried from Chunar near Varanasi, these columns represented a remarkable feat of engineering and artistic skill. The sandstone was meticulously polished to a lustrous sheen, giving it a distinctive "Mauryan polish" that made the stone gleam as if it were metal. This technical mastery alone would have conveyed the wealth and organizational capacity of the empire, signaling that this was a power capable of commanding vast resources and skilled labor.

The transportation of these colossal stone shafts across hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles was an undertaking of immense logistical complexity. Imagine the sheer manpower required to move these monolithic structures, weighing many tons, without the aid of modern machinery. This logistical triumph would have been a public

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spectacle in itself, a visual demonstration of the emperor's ability to mobilize resources and manpower on an unprecedented scale. Each pillar, upon its erection, became a permanent fixture in the landscape, an unmissable declaration of Ashoka’s presence and principles.

The pillars typically consisted of a long, tapering monolithic shaft, surmounted by a capital that was often zoomorphic. The most famous of these is the Lion Capital from Sarnath, now India's national emblem. This capital features four addorsed lions, facing the cardinal directions, standing on an abacus frieze that depicts other animals—an elephant, a galloping horse, a bull, and a lion—separated by dharma chakras, or wheels of law. Below the abacus is a bell-shaped lotus, a common motif in ancient Indian art, often associated with purity and creation. The symbolism here is multi-layered. The lions, powerful predators, represented royalty and sovereignty, their roar echoing the widespread reach of Ashoka's *dhamma*. The wheel, or chakra, was a potent symbol of universal dominion, both political and spiritual, especially within Buddhist thought, signifying the turning of the Wheel of Dhamma by the Buddha.

The choice of animals on the capitals was not arbitrary. Lions, elephants, and bulls were all symbols of strength, royalty, and fertility in ancient Indian iconography. Their placement atop these monumental pillars imbued the imperial message with a sense of cosmic order and divine sanction. The very act of placing these powerful animal symbols at key locations, often near important trade routes or pilgrimage sites, transformed the landscape into a stage for the emperor's message. These were not mere decorations; they were integral components of a carefully constructed visual vocabulary designed to resonate with diverse audiences across the empire.

What truly set the Ashokan pillars apart, however, were the edicts inscribed on their shafts. These edicts, written in Prakrit using the Brahmi script (and sometimes Kharosthi or Greek/Aramaic in northwestern regions), were moral discourses and instructions from the emperor to his subjects. They articulated Ashoka’s *dhamma*, which was less a specific religion and more a universal code of conduct emphasizing non-violence, tolerance, respect for elders, and compassion for all living beings. The pillars, therefore, served as the empire's broadcasting system, literally carving the emperor's moral philosophy into the very fabric of the land.

These inscriptions demonstrate a unique approach to governance, one that sought to persuade and uplift rather than simply command. Ashoka's personal journey of remorse after the bloody Kalinga War led him to embrace *dhamma* as a guiding principle for his reign. The pillars, with their solemn pronouncements, were physical manifestations of this transformation. They announced a new era of moral leadership, where imperial power was not merely about conquest but about fostering a just and compassionate society. The accessibility of these edicts, placed in public spaces and often written in local vernaculars, suggests an intent to engage directly with the populace.

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The locations of the pillars were strategically chosen. Many were erected along ancient trade routes, near centers of population, or at significant Buddhist pilgrimage sites. This placement ensured maximum visibility and impact, reaching both merchants and travelers, as well as those engaged in religious observances. For instance, the pillar at Sarnath marks the site where the Buddha delivered his first sermon, making it a particularly potent location for Ashoka to proclaim his *dhamma*. The very act of erecting a pillar at such a sacred site underscored the emperor’s connection to the Buddhist faith and his role as a protector of the *dhamma*.

Beyond the pillars, other elements of Mauryan visual culture, though less numerous and often less well-preserved, also contributed to the imperial narrative. Cave dwellings, such as those in the Barabar Hills, were dedicated by Ashoka to Ajivika ascetics, demonstrating a policy of religious tolerance. These caves, with their highly polished interior surfaces mimicking the pillars, showcased the same exceptional stone-working techniques. The precise, almost jewel-like finish of these caves suggests a deliberate attempt to create a sense of awe and reverence, even in these relatively humble abodes.

The Mauryan period also saw the emergence of monumental sculpture in the round, distinct from the more narrative relief carvings of later periods. The Chauri-bearer from Didarganj, a graceful female figure holding a fly-whisk, exemplifies the highly polished surfaces and idealized forms characteristic of Mauryan art. While its exact function remains debated, such figures likely adorned imperial settings, embodying ideals of beauty and prosperity associated with the Mauryan court. The scale and artistry of these sculptures further illustrate the sophistication of Mauryan workshops and their ability to produce works of enduring aesthetic appeal.

The impact of Ashoka’s visual program was profound and long-lasting. The pillars not only solidified his reign but also established a visual language of imperial authority that would be referenced and reinterpreted by subsequent dynasties. The very idea of an emperor communicating directly with his subjects through monumental public inscriptions was a powerful precedent. Moreover, the strong association of the lion capital with Buddhist symbolism laid the groundwork for the enduring visual connection between royal power and the *dhamma* in South Asian art. While empires rise and fall, the silent sentinels of Ashokan pillars continued to stand, their polished surfaces reflecting the sun and their inscribed messages whispering across millennia, a testament to a unique moment when art, architecture, and ethical governance converged under the ambitious vision of a single ruler.

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