



# Mauryan Art and Architecture- Part 1

## Introduction

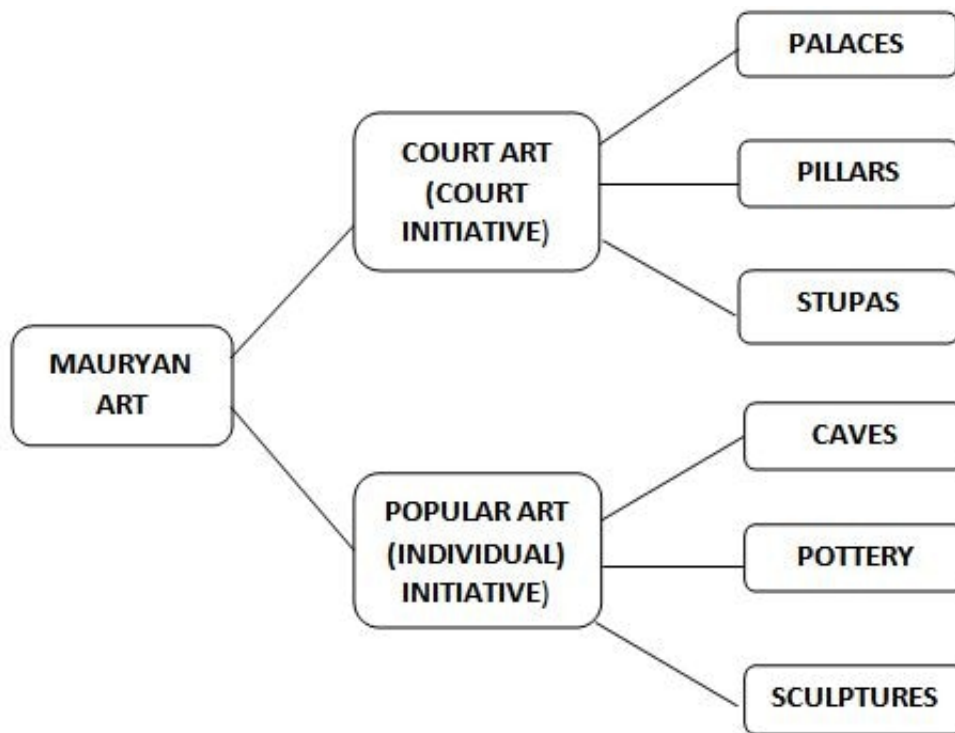
- The Great Mauryan ruler **Ashoka** embraced **Buddhism** (as a part of shraman tradition) and the immense Buddhist missionary activities that followed during his rule paved the way for the development of **Mauryan sculptural and architectural styles**.
- King Ashoka patronized the **shraman tradition** in the third century BCE.
  - The shraman tradition refers to several Indian religious movements parallel to but separate from the historical vedic religion.
  - It includes **Jainism, Buddhism**, and others such as **Ajivikas**, and **Carvakas**.

## Background

- In 321 BC, **Chandragupta Maurya**, with the help of **Chanakya** (author of Arthashastra) founded the **Mauryan dynasty** after overthrowing **Nanda Dynasty**.
- The Mauryan Empire was the first most powerful Indian empire to bring the entire Indian subcontinent under a single rule.
  - The Mauryan empire under Chandragupta Maurya spread its boundaries into Central Asia and Persia.
- **Expansion of Mauryan Empire:** Chandragupta Maurya was succeeded by his son **Bindusara** in 298 BC who expanded the kingdom over most of present-day India, except Kalinga.
- **Mauryan Dynasty under Ashoka:** Bindusara's kingdom was inherited by his son Ashoka the Great in 274 B.C.
- **Kalinga Invasion:** During the invasion of Kalinga, Ashoka renounced bloodshed and adopted the policy of Ahimsa and adopted Buddhism.

## Mauryan Art and Architecture

Mauryan architecture can be divided into Court Art and Popular Art.

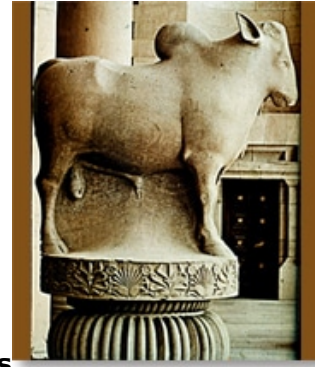


**Mauryan Court Art:** Implies architectural works (in the form of pillars, stupas and palaces) commissioned by Mauryan rulers for political as well as religious reasons.

- **Palaces:** Greek historian, **Megasthenes**, described the palaces of the Mauryan empire as one of the greatest creations of mankind and Chinese traveler **Fa Hien** called Mauryan palaces as god gifted monuments.
  - **Persian Influence:** The palace of Chandragupta Maurya was inspired by the **Achaemenid palaces** at Persepolis in Iran.
    - **Material Used: Wood** was the principal building material used during the Mauryan Empire.
    - **Examples:** The Mauryan capital at **Pataliputra**, Ashoka's palace at **Kumrahar**, **Chandragupta Maurya's palace**.
- **Pillars:** Ashoka pillars, (usually made of **chunar sandstone**), as a symbol of the state, assumed a great significance in the entire Mauryan Empire.
  - **Objective:** The main objective was to disseminate the **Buddhist ideology** and **court orders** in the entire Mauryan empire.
  - **Language:** While most Ashoka pillar edicts were in **Pali** and **Prakrit** language, few were written in **Greek or Aramaic** language also.
  - **Architecture:** Mauryan pillars mainly comprise of four parts:
    - **Shaft:** A long shaft formed the base and was made up of a single piece of stone or monolith.
    - **Capital:** On top of shaft lay the capital, which was either lotus-shaped or bell-shaped.
    - **Abacus:** Above the capital, there was a circular or rectangular base known as the abacus.
    - **Capital Figure:** All the capital figures (usually animals like a bull, lion, elephant, etc) are vigorous and carved standing on a square or circular abacus.
  - **Similarities with Persian (Achaemenian) Pillars**
    - **Polished Stones and Motifs:** Both Maurya and Achaemenian pillars, used polished stones and have certain common sculpture motifs such as the lotus.
    - **Proclamations:** Maurya's idea of inscribing proclamations (related to Buddhist

teachings and court orders) on pillars has its origin in Persian pillars.

- **Third Person:** Inscriptions of both empires begin in the third person and then move to the first person.

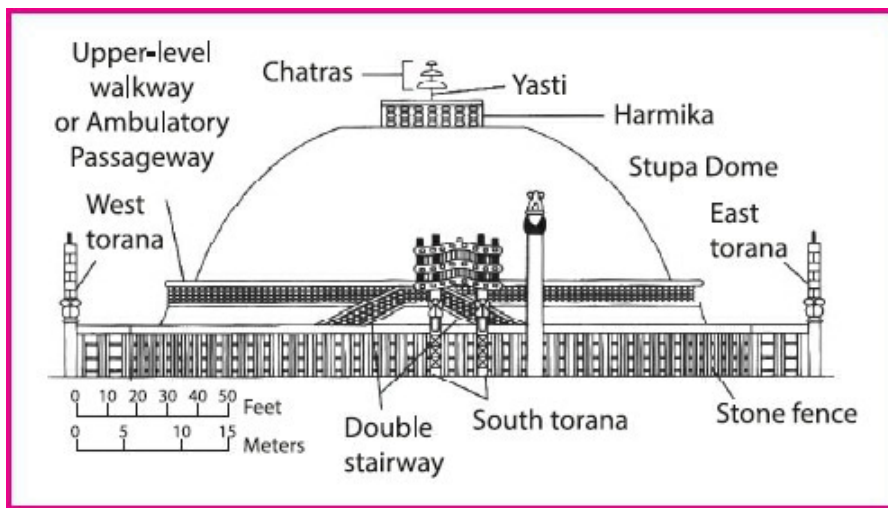


- **Differences with Persian (Achaemenian) Pillars**

- **The Capital Figure:** It was absent in Mauryan pillars of the Kumhrar hall whereas pillars at Persepolis have the elaborate capital figures.
- **The Shape and Ornamentation:** The shape of Mauryan lotus is different from the Persian pillar.
- **Pillar Surface:** Most of the Persian pillars have a fluted/ ridged surface while the Mauryan pillars have a smooth surface.
- **Architectural Scheme:** The Achaemenid pillars were generally part of some larger architectural scheme, and bit complex and complicated, while the Ashokan pillars were simple and independent freestanding monuments.
- **Shaft:** Unlike Mauryan shafts which are built of monolith (single piece of stone), Persian/Achaemenian shafts were built of separate segments of stones (aggregated one above the other).

## Pillar Edicts and Inscriptions

- **Ashoka's 7 pillar edicts:** These were found at Topra (Delhi), Meerut, Kausambhi, Rampurva, Champaran, Mehrauli:
  - **Pillar Edict I:** Asoka's principle of protection to people.
  - **Pillar Edict II:** Defines Dhamma as the minimum of sins, many virtues, compassion, liberality, truthfulness, and purity.
  - **Pillar Edict III:** Abolishes sins of harshness, cruelty, anger, pride, etc.
  - **Pillar Edict IV:** Deals with duties of Rajukas.
  - **Pillar Edict V:** List of animals and birds which should not be killed on some days and another list of animals which have not to be killed at all.
  - **Pillar Edict VI:** Dhamma policy
  - **Pillar Edict VII:** Works done by Asoka for Dhamma policy.
- **Minor Pillar Inscriptions**
  - **Rummindei Pillar Inscription:** Asoka's visit to Lumbini & exemption of Lumbini from tax.
  - **Nigalisagar Pillar Inscription, Nepal:** It mentions that Asoka increased the height of stupa of Buddha Konakamana to its double size.
- **Major Pillar Inscriptions**
  - **Sarnath Lion Capital:** Near Varanasi was built by Ashoka in commemoration of Dhammachakrapravartana or the first sermon of Buddha.
  - **Vaishali Pillar, Bihar,** single lion, with no inscription.
  - **Sankissa Pillar, Uttar Pradesh**
  - **Lauriya-Nandangarth, Champaran, Bihar.**
  - **Lauriya-Araraj, Champaran, Bihar**
  - **Allahabad pillar, Uttar Pradesh.**
- **Stupa:** Stupas were burial mounds prevalent in India from the vedic period.



- **Architecture:** Stupas consist of a cylindrical drum with a circular **anda** and a **harmika** and a **chhatra** on the top.
  - **Anda:** Hemispherical mound symbolic of the mound of dirt used to cover Buddha's remains (in many stupas actual relics were used).
  - **Harmika:** Square railing on top of the mound.
  - **Chhatra:** Central pillar supporting a triple umbrella form.
- **Material Used:** The core of the stupa was made of **unburnt brick** while the outer surface was made by using **burnt bricks**, which were then covered with a thick layer of plaster and medhi and the toran were decorated with wooden sculptures.
- **Examples:**
  - **Sanchi Stupa** in Madhya Pradesh is the most famous of the Ashokan stupas.
  - **Piprahwa Stupa** in Uttar Pradesh is the oldest one.
  - **Stupas built after the death of Buddha:** Rajagriha, Vaishali, Kapilavastu, Allakappa, Ramagrama, Vethapida, Pava, Kushinagar and Pippalivana.
  - **Stupa at Bairat, Rajasthan:** Grand stupa with a circular mound and a circumambulatory path.

### Depiction of Buddha at Stupas

- **Symbols:** In the early stages, Buddha was represented through symbols that represented the different events of Buddha's life like **footprints, lotus thrones, chakras, stupas, etc.**
- **Jataka Stories:** Later on, Jataka stories (stories associated with the previous birth of Buddha) were portrayed on the railings and torans of the stupas.
  - The Jataka stories that find frequent depiction are Chhadanta Jataka, Sibi Jataka, Ruru Jataka, Vessantara Jataka, Vidur Jataka and Shama Jataka.
- **The chief events** from Buddha's life which are narrated in the arts are birth, renunciation, enlightenment, the first sermon (dharmachakrapravartana) and mahaparinirvana (death).

**Note: (Mauryan Popular Art is discussed under Mauryan Art and Architecture Part-2)**

