

STONE

Stone being a hardy medium was the most widely used by artisans in ancient India.

It was used across the peninsula and locally available varieties most naturally became the preferred ones. In ancient Indian Art one comes across works made of schist, limestone, sandstone, granite, marble, basalt, etc to name a few. The quality of stone sculptures as well as the subjects depended on the nature of patronage received from the rulers as well as prevailing religious beliefs of the times. It often took a long time for art from a ruling dynasty to emerge. A large part of the initial reign is devoted to conquests, battles and consolidation. It is after establishing the territory and generating revenues that each empire would begin the task of building monuments and temples.

EARLY SCULPTURE

Although there exists evidence of stone sculpture in early ages like the Indus Valley Civilization it is around the time of Ashoka (3rd Century B.C) that monumental depictions began to emerge. The medium used was red, white and buff sandstones.

GANDHARA

From the 1st Century onwards the Kushan dynasty that ruled a vast region from Peshawar to Taxila and extending right up to Mathura played an important role in the development of art in the region. The sculptors in the Gandhara region were very prolific and worked on schist. The subjects revolved around the life and times of the Buddha with Buddhism then being the prevalent religion. Gandharan sculptures are beautiful and widely seen in museums around the world.

CENTRAL INDIA

The Kushan dynasty also ruled areas in and around Mathura. The medium worked on was red mottled sandstone. From the 4th Century onwards the Gupta Dynasty assumed great significance. Hinduism replaced Buddhism and Jainism as the preferred religion. With this the iconographical representations in stone art also changed. The Guptas also developed their own refined classical style with stylistic traits. One also finds depictions of the Buddha as the Guptas were tolerant and moderate in their approach. The work possessed a lovely fluidity in facial expressions and forms. By the medieval period other dynastical powers like the Chandelas assumed significance in Central India. They too built a large number of temples with extensive stone work. The focus shifted to more elaborate workmanship.

BIHAR AND BENGAL

Bihar and Bengal also produced some fine stone sculptures from the 8th to the 12th Centuries under the Pala dynasty. The earlier phase had Buddhist imagery. Hindu images began emerging in the later phase. The sculptures are beautiful and made using black and grey stone.

SOUTH INDIA

In South India after the decline of the Satavahanas of Amaravati the Chalukyas and Rashtrakutas came into power. The Rashtrakutas controlled a large geographical spread with members of the clan even controlling parts of northern India. The Elephanta caves near Bombay were also built by them.

Around the 6th Century the Pallava dynasty came into power in Tamil Nadu. From the 7th - 8th Century the dynasty began building enormous cave temples. The Pallavas developed a unique style. The figures were imparted a powerful look. Ornamentation was simple and the form was given more importance. The dynasty is a sought after one among art collectors due to its distinct style and limited availability. By the 9th Century the great Cholas came to power. They were great art patrons who developed a new style to their taste. Importance was given to beauty, proportion, posture, detailing etc. The Cholas built innumerable temples and the dynasty lasted right up to the late 13th Century. By the 14th Century the Vijayanagara dynasty overpowered the Cholas. Their emergence yet again changed the style in art. The focus shifted to great details. Ornaments were multiple and proportions changed yet again. By the 17th Century the Nayak clan assumed power in Madurai. They built the spectacular Madurai Meenakshi temple. The rulers were horse lovers and hence one gets to find several depictions of horses in temple as well as town architecture.

KERALA

Kerala which occupies the southernmost tip of the country was also an important centre for art. The number of stone sculptures produced were very few in number. The earlier ones were done during the Pallava period and in a style similar to the Pallava icons in Tamil Nadu. From the 10th Century onwards the typical Kerala style that one gets to see in Kerala bronzes was adopted in the stone works as well.