Ajanta Paintings

Two Days with Nāṭya, Śilpa and Citra · Full Programme

Sat 20 – Sun 21 February 2027 · Garden Studio, Midlands Arts Centre, Birmingham
Led by Dr Sindhu Saraswathy

DAY ONE — ORNAMENT: ĀHĀRYA AND RASA

Lotus and haṃsa · yakṣa and gaṇa · elephant, bull and peacock

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In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *āhārya* is the abhinaya of ornament and costume: it declares the nature of a character before a word is spoken. At Ajanta the ornamental field does the same for the painted world, and sets the *rasa* of the space the figures inhabit. A rasa is not fixed to a motif; it arises from context, through *vibhāva*. Three rasas govern the day: *śānta*, *hāsya* and *vīra*.

These forms are the citrakāra's discipline. Seeing a form whole before drawing it is *Dhyāna*; repeating it until the hand holds it without hesitation is *Vrata*. They are also a source of the figure's language: the hastas *padmakośa*, *alapadma*, *haṃsāsya* and *haṃsapakṣa* take their names and shapes from them. The hand that learns the lotus today holds a lotus gesture tomorrow.

Session 1 — The Lotus and the Haṃsa

Rasa: śānta

At Ajanta the lotus is held in the hand of the enlightened Padmapāṇi. It carries purity, the flower rising from mud unstained by water, and compassion, the Bodhisattva's *karuṇā*. Its rasa is *śānta*, the stillness of awakened mind; not *karuṇa* rasa, which in Bharata is pathos born of grief. The *haṃsa*, bird of discernment that separates milk from water, shares it. *Śānta* is the ninth rasa, established after Bharata by Abhinavagupta, for whom every rasa arises from it and returns to it.

Participants paint the lotus from bud (*mukulita*) to full flower (*vikasita*) in a *Sama* composition, bilateral symmetry on a measured axis, the same axis the *Śilpaśāstra* gives the figure on Day Two, then set the *haṃsa* among the blooms of the lotus vine.

Session 2 — Yakṣas and Gaṇas: The Small Figures

Rasa: hāsya

The border is measured geometry: repeated at fixed intervals (*māna*), flowing with vitality (*prāṇa*), giving delight (*harṣa*). Within it live the yakṣas and gaṇas. Among the *vibhāvas* of *hāsya*, Bharata names distorted dress and ornament: these figures are *hāsya* made of *āhārya*. He also grades laughter by character, *smita* and *hasita* for the superior, *vihasita* and *upahasita* for the middling. The yakṣas laugh in the middling grades; the Bodhisattvas of Day Two hold *smita*. Participants draw the small figures within the vine, keeping its *laya*.

Session 3 — Gaja, Vṛṣabha, Mayūra: Strength

Rasa: vīra

Vīra arises from *utsāha*, energy and resolve; its vibhāvas are strength, valour and power. Elephant, bull and peacock bring *chetana*, the life-force visible in every correctly held line. The white elephant is the day's lesson in *Citrasūtra* technique: foreshortened legs compressing as they advance, *vartanā* turning the form into space, vine scrolls behind the feet separating the planes. The paired bulls introduce *kṣaya-vṛddhi*, the diminution and extension of form in movement. The peacock closes the day: it feeds on snakes yet stays graceful, and as Skanda's vāhana it is *vīra* held with *mādhurya*. Strength need not be heavy.

DAY TWO — THE FIGURE AS ARRESTED DRAMA

One grammar, followed through three texts

The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the *Śilpaśāstra* and the *Citrasūtra* do not describe three figures. They describe one. Its *sthāna*, *pramāṇa* and *bhāva* originate in drama, are fixed by measure, and are realised in paint. Day Two follows a single Ajanta figure through that grammar.

Session 4 — Sthāna and Bhāva: The Figure Takes Its Stance

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* gives the figure its language:

- *sthāna*, its stance
- *cārī* and *karaṇa*, its movement, and the unit of dance in which stance, gesture and movement unite
- *hasta*, its gesture
- *āhārya*, its ornament
- *bhāva*, its inner state, from which *rasa* arises

The *Śilpaśāstra* fixes that stance in measured flexion (*bhaṅga*); the *Citrasūtra* carries the same *sthāna* onto the wall as the figure's orientation to the viewer. Participants read an Ajanta figure as arrested drama, then choose the *sthāna*, *hasta* and *bhāva* of their own.

Session 5 — Pramāṇa and Bhaṅga: The Figure Is Measured

Measure lets the posture carry its *bhāva* without distortion. The *Śilpaśāstra*'s *tāla-māna* gives the proportional grid; the *Citrasūtra* names *pramāṇa* among the guṇas of painting. On that grid the body takes its *bhaṅga*, its flexion from the central plumb line (*madhyasūtra*):

- **Samabhaṅga:** the body upright and balanced on the line.
- **Ābhaṅga:** a slight flexion, the weight shifted to one side.
- **Tribhaṅga:** three bends, head, torso and hips deflected in alternating directions. Most of Ajanta's figures stand in it.
- **Atibhaṅga:** the exaggerated flexion of vigorous action.

Participants construct their figure in *tribhaṅga* on its grid, placing the plumb line, the three bends their *sthāna* requires, and the *āhārya* in its correct position on the body.

Session 6 — Rekhā, Varṇa, Vartanā: The Figure Gains Colour and Depth

Five techniques bring the figure off the wall:

- **Rekhā:** line weight alone advances and recedes.
- **Kṣaya-vṛddhi:** the form diminishes and extends as it turns.
- **Varṇa:** colour laid in the Ajanta palette of red ochre, yellow ochre, terre verte, lamp black and lapis lazuli. Colour is not decoration: the *Nāṭyaśāstra* gives each rasa its own colour, and the figure's colour carries its *bhāva*.
- **Vartanā:** the shading system of *chāya-tāpa*, brightness and dimness, laid over the colour to round the form.
- **Nimnonnata:** depression and elevation. Vartanā shows which zones of the body recede (*nimna*) and which rise toward the viewer (*unnata*), so the flat wall reads as relief.

The finished figure is tested against the *Citrasūtra*'s guṇas of painting: *sthāna*, *pramāṇa*, *bhūlamba*, *mādhurya*, *vibhaktatā*, *sādṛśya* and *kṣaya-vṛddhi*. The rasa it was built to carry should now arrive. Participants complete their figure study.