

Conservation and Preservation of Rock Cave Art at Kumattipatti - A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Rock arts are ancient, human-made markings or paintings made on natural stone. India is the storehouse of the world's largest and richest rock art. Rock art reflects humanity's rich spiritual and cultural heritage as a civilized society. It also serves as a historical record detailing the hunting habits and ways of life of the local communities. But this rich cultural heritage has to be conserved and preserved for future generations. The need for conservation arises due to many factors, like weathering and the activities of the men who scribble on such rock paintings. The present study focuses on the preservation of rock cave paintings at Kumattipatti, located in the Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: rock cave, conservation, paintings, preservation.

Introduction

Rock cave art is a drawing, painting, or similar work on or of stone, usually from the ancient or prehistoric era in various parts of the world. Drawings or paintings, carvings or inscriptions, patterns carved into the rock, and ground drawings are all examples of rock art. Even while the depictions of ancient animals, equipment, and human activities are typically metaphorical rather than literal, they frequently give light to modern life in the distant past. Art from multiple different ages may be found in one location. Rock art may have been used in prehistoric religion, maybe in connection with ancient mythology. Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, North America, and South America are all home to significant rock arts.¹

The ancient artist used more than 16 colors. These include the most commonly used shades of white and red, as well as green, black, yellow, orange, and purple. Rocks, minerals, and powdered dry vegetable roots are used to create colors, which are then combined with water, animal fat, or tree gum. Limestone gave the white color and iron oxide supplied the shade of red. The colors would have been applied with twig brushes made of silk cotton or fur. One of the reasons these paintings have endured for so many years is the use of natural colors.²

The ancient Indian cave paintings are an excellent example of the country's deep connections to nature. The Ajanta, Ellora, Elephanta, Bhimbetka, Sittanavasal, and Bagh caves, among others, are home to some of India's most famous cave paintings.³

The earliest cave paintings discovered in India date to the upper Paleolithic. It's amazing to learn that archaeologist Archibold Carlleyle made the first rock art discovery in India in 1867–1868. Early archaeologists Cockburn, Anderson, Mithra, and Ghosh made numerous site discoveries throughout the Indian subcontinent. The walls of caves located throughout India have remnants of rock paintings on them. Buddhist and Jain monks later used the caverns as places of prayer and as homes.⁴

UNESCO has classified many well-known caverns, including Ellora and Ajanta, as world historic sites. The Western Ghats of India are home to numerous undiscovered caverns. The Coimbatore district is home to one of the caverns.

Excavating History", Tulika Publishers, Chennai, 2021, p-21.

3 <https://pickyourtrail.com/blog/cave-paintings>

4 <https://www.upscsupersimplified.com/rock-cut-cave-paintings/>

1 <https://www.britannica.com/art/rock-art>

2 Devika Cariapa., "India through archaeology:

Kumattipatti Rock Cave Art of Coimbatore

The textile centre of South India or the Manchester of South India, Coimbatore is the third-largest city in the Tamil Nadu state and is heavily industrialised. The district is close to the Noyyal River's bank. According to archaeological records, Karikalan, the first of the early Cholas, established Coimbatore even before the second or third century AD. Rashtrakutas, Chalukyas, Pandyas, Hoysalas, and the Vijayanagar Kings were some of its other notable kings. When Kongunadu, along with the rest of the state, fell to the British, its name was changed to Coimbatore, and it is still known by this name today; in local Tamil, it is also known as Kovai.⁵

Kumattipatti is a small village located 30 kilometres from Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu, near the border with Kerala's Palakkad district. Kumattipatti Rock Cave Art is the name given to the rock cave paintings at Kumattipatti. Pathimalai is another name for it. Kumattipatti rock paintings can be found in naturally formed caves in the Pathi hills, which are known to have been the habitat of prehistoric men. It's strange to think that when we interviewed a few village elders, they were completely unaware of the existence of such cave arts. They claim there is a temple dedicated to Lord Murugan above the Pathi hills.

The cave paintings are monochromatic, with white pigment. Because of the representation of swords in the images, these paintings may be associated with the Iron Age. The Kumattipatti cave paintings show various facets of the prehistoric human existence in this area. The main features are a crowd pulling chariots, a Mahat taming an elephant, and a group of warriors. The scene depicts the pulling of the chariots, which could be a religious festival observed by these groups. Rainwater cannot enter the cave because of the way the entrance is chiselled. This rock cave surface has cup-shaped depressions. Cupules are thought to have been purposefully scooped out of the rock by very early humans for ritual purposes or to hold a torch (a long stick with burning material at one end used to

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provide) to protect men from wild animals.⁶

In an interview with the Times of India, members of the Tamilnadu Art and Literature Association stated that these paintings were even certified by the Archaeological Survey of India as being more than 3000 to 4000 years old. These paintings are being destroyed by youth who go out to drink or picnic. For fun, the youngsters scratch out the paintings and paint their names in English on top of them, as well as other graphic images.⁷ As a result, it is essential to safeguard such natural arts from vandalism.



Picture: Kumattipatti Cave Painting, Kumattipatti, Coimbatore

⁵ <https://coimbatore.nic.in/about-district/>

⁶ Janani A, Member of *Yaakai*, an NGO, interviewed on 1st June 2022
<https://timesofindia.com/city/coimbatore/ancient-cave-paintings-in-dist-face-destruction/amp-articlesshow/70032388.cms>.

Conservation of Rock Cave Art

Rock art is under threat due to development pressures, graffiti/vandalism, poor tourist management, and natural impacts. Thousands of sites have been damaged or destroyed in recent years on every continent. Human population growth and development, as well as globalisation, are having a significant impact on the culture of traditional owners, site custodians, and local communities whose ancestors created much of the world's rock art and whose living culture it is still a part of. The importance of rock art conservation and management receives little attention, as well as insufficient funding and support.⁸

The valuable treasure of each locality, rock art, can be preserved in the following ways:

1. There is an urgent need to raise awareness about rock art, the variety and severity of threats to it, and the importance of effective responses to these threats. Public and political awareness of rock art is critical for successful conservation and management planning and budgeting.
2. To manage rock art sites and groups of rock art sites in their landscapes, systems are required. These include determining the significance of sites, their management requirements, and the development of long-term conservation strategies. The active participation of all key stakeholders, particularly traditional owners, site custodians, and local communities, as well as the allocation of capable human resources required to care for rock art sites, is critical to the development of such systems.
3. Careful guidance is required for the work of physically protecting and, if necessary, conserving rock art sites. The same is true for cultural practices that protect the physical and spiritual integrity of rock art sites. Physical conservation and cultural conservation must be considered, planned, and implemented in parallel.

⁸ Neville Agnew & Janette Deacon., *Rock Art A Cultural Treasure At Risk.*, The Getty Conservation Institute Los Angeles., 2015

In each situation, it is essential that the right people are available, that specialist knowledge is respected and that judgment about the practical and cultural advantages and effects of potential courses of action be made with information.⁹

4. A railing or grill can be erected to protect the cave painting. The government should erect a sign outside the cave stating that the site is under archaeological protection and that any damage to the site will result in severe penalties.

Conclusion

Rock art is a precious but vulnerable human heritage. We must cherish and protect our ancestors' cultural legacies by ensuring:

1. The rock arts should be valued and recognized at the local, regional, national, and international levels.
2. Rock art site communities should be proud to carry out the responsibilities of site guardianship and stewardship.
3. Indigenous peoples, local communities, governments, researchers, heritage professionals, and the broader community collaborate to develop more effective methods of conserving, managing, and utilizing rock art.

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