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Ancient Murals and Fresco Paintings as Historical Sources: Uses and Continuity of Tradition

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Abstract

Ancient murals and fresco paintings constitute an important category of historical sources that provide valuable insights into the social, religious, political, and cultural life of past civilizations. Executed on permanent architectural surfaces such as cave walls, temples, palaces, churches, and public buildings, these paintings were not merely decorative but deeply embedded in the historical context of their time. As visual documents, murals and frescoes complement literary and archaeological evidence, often revealing aspects of history that written sources either overlook or deliberately silence. The present study examines ancient murals and fresco paintings as historical sources, focusing on their uses and the continuity of artistic traditions over time. In ancient societies, murals served multiple functions: they communicated religious beliefs, narrated mythological and historical events, legitimized political authority, and reflected social hierarchies, occupations, costumes, and everyday life. Fresco techniques, particularly those involving the application of pigments on wet plaster, ensured durability and permanence, allowing these visual records to survive for centuries. Through careful historical interpretation, such paintings help reconstruct the worldview, value systems, and material culture of ancient communities. This research also emphasizes the role of murals as instruments of patronage and power. Rulers, religious institutions, and elite groups often commissioned wall paintings to assert authority, promote ideological messages, and reinforce collective identity. Consequently, murals functioned as tools of visual communication, accessible even to non-literate populations. Their themes and iconography therefore hold significant importance for understanding mass culture and popular belief systems in historical societies. Another major focus of this study is the continuity of mural and fresco traditions. Despite political changes, religious transformations, and technological advancements, the practice of wall painting did not disappear. Instead, it adapted to new contexts, materials, and

purposes. Traditional themes were reinterpreted, techniques were modified, and new meanings were attached, allowing murals to survive as living traditions in many regions. This continuity demonstrates cultural resilience and the transmission of artistic knowledge across generations. By analyzing ancient murals and fresco paintings through a historical lens, this study highlights their value as dynamic and multifaceted sources. They are not static remnants of the past but evolving traditions that link ancient societies with later historical periods. Ultimately, the research underscores the importance of visual culture in historical reconstruction and argues for the inclusion of murals and frescoes as essential sources in the study of ancient history.

Keywords : Ancient Murals, Fresco Paintings, Historical Sources, Visual Culture, Religious Patronage, Social History, Cultural Continuity, Wall Paintings, Art and History, Living Traditions

Introduction

Ancient murals and fresco paintings occupy a significant place in the study of history as they serve as enduring visual records of past civilizations. Created on walls, ceilings, and architectural surfaces, these paintings were integral to the cultural and social environments in which they emerged. Unlike movable art objects, murals and frescoes were closely connected to specific spaces such as caves, temples, palaces, monasteries, and public buildings, making them inseparable from their historical context. As a result, they provide historians with direct visual access to the beliefs, values, and lived realities of ancient societies. Scholars of history increasingly recognize that visual sources, including wall paintings, are as important as literary texts and archaeological remains for reconstructing the past (Chakravarti, 2001). In ancient times, murals and fresco paintings fulfilled multiple functions that extended far beyond aesthetic appeal. They were used to depict religious narratives, mythological episodes, royal ceremonies, and scenes from everyday life. Through these representations, artists conveyed ideas about cosmology, morality, social order, and political authority. For largely non-literate populations, such visual narratives acted as powerful tools of communication and education. Historical analysis of these paintings reveals details about social stratification, gender roles, occupational activities, costumes, and material culture that are often absent from written sources (Dehejia, 1997). Thus, murals and frescoes function as visual archives that supplement and sometimes challenge textual histories. From a historical perspective, murals and frescoes also reflect patterns of patronage and power. Kings, elites, and religious institutions frequently sponsored wall paintings to legitimize authority, demonstrate piety, and project cultural dominance. The selection of themes, styles, and locations was rarely accidental; rather, it was shaped by political ambitions and ideological objectives. Consequently, these artworks provide valuable evidence for understanding state formation, religious movements, and cultural interactions in ancient and early medieval periods (Michell, 2000). Their study enables historians to examine how visual culture was used to reinforce collective identity and social cohesion. Equally important is the question of continuity. Despite periods of decline caused by political instability, invasions, or changing artistic preferences, the tradition of mural and fresco painting did not vanish. Instead, it evolved and adapted to new historical circumstances. Techniques were modified, materials changed, and themes were reinterpreted, yet the core practice of narrating history, belief, and social life through painted walls continued. In many regions, later temple murals, monastic paintings, and even folk wall traditions demonstrate a clear inheritance from ancient practices,

highlighting long-term cultural transmission (Ray, 2016). This continuity allows historians to trace connections between ancient, medieval, and early modern societies. Studying ancient murals and fresco paintings as historical sources therefore broadens the scope of historical inquiry. These visual materials challenge the dominance of text-based history and encourage an interdisciplinary approach that combines art history, archaeology, and social history. By examining their uses and enduring traditions, historians can better understand how societies remembered their past, expressed their ideals, and transmitted cultural knowledge across generations. In this sense, murals and frescoes are not merely artistic achievements but vital historical documents that connect material culture with historical consciousness (Thapar, 2002).

Literature Review

The study of ancient murals and fresco paintings has attracted sustained scholarly attention from historians, art historians, archaeologists, and cultural theorists, who have examined these visual materials as important sources for understanding ancient societies. Early studies largely approached murals from an art historical perspective, focusing on stylistic development, iconography, and aesthetic value. Pioneering scholars emphasized formal analysis, technique, and chronology, situating mural traditions within broader artistic movements of ancient civilizations (Coomaraswamy, 1934). While these works established the foundational importance of murals in the history of art, they often treated paintings as isolated artistic achievements rather than as historical documents embedded in social realities. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, scholarship began to shift toward contextual and interdisciplinary interpretations. Historians and archaeologists increasingly recognized murals and frescoes as valuable historical sources that could supplement textual and material evidence. Studies on ancient Indian cave paintings, particularly those at Ajanta and Bagh, highlighted their narrative quality and their ability to depict court life, religious practices, trade activities, and social hierarchies (Dehejia, 1997). Such works demonstrated that murals provide insights into everyday life and cultural practices that are rarely described in contemporary literary sources. This approach marked a significant departure from purely aesthetic readings and positioned wall paintings within the framework of social and cultural history. Another important strand of literature examines the religious and ideological functions of murals and frescoes. Scholars have argued that wall paintings played a central role in shaping and transmitting religious ideas, especially in societies with limited literacy. Research on Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian murals shows how visual narratives were used to communicate doctrine, reinforce moral values, and create sacred environments (Michell, 2000). These studies emphasize patronage patterns, noting that religious institutions and ruling elites often used murals to assert spiritual authority and legitimize political power. As a result, murals are increasingly viewed as instruments of ideology and tools of visual persuasion rather than neutral decorative elements. Comparative studies have further expanded the historiography by placing mural traditions of different civilizations in dialogue with one another. Research comparing Indian cave frescoes with Roman wall paintings from Pompeii and Herculaneum highlights both shared functions and regional variations in technique, theme, and symbolism (Ling, 1991). Such comparative frameworks have helped scholars identify universal aspects of mural art—such as narrative storytelling and spatial symbolism—while also emphasizing the distinct cultural contexts that shaped these traditions. This body of literature underscores the value of murals for

global and cross-cultural historical analysis. The question of continuity and survival of mural traditions has also received growing attention in recent decades. Scholars focusing on cultural continuity argue that mural painting should be understood as a living tradition rather than a closed historical phenomenon. Studies on later temple murals, monastic paintings, and regional wall art traditions reveal how ancient techniques and iconographic themes were adapted to changing historical conditions (Ray, 2016). These works highlight processes of transmission, including apprenticeship, community memory, and ritual practice, which allowed mural traditions to persist despite political and economic transformations. Such perspectives are particularly important for historians interested in long-term cultural processes and the interaction between tradition and change. Conservation-focused literature adds another dimension to the study of ancient murals. Researchers involved in heritage preservation have documented the material composition, techniques, and deterioration of frescoes, emphasizing their fragility and the challenges of preservation (Agrawal, 1984). While primarily technical in nature, these studies contribute indirectly to historical understanding by revealing information about materials, technology, and environmental conditions of the past. They also raise important questions about authenticity, restoration, and historical interpretation, especially when modern interventions alter the original appearance of murals. More recent theoretical contributions draw on visual culture studies and cultural history to reinterpret murals as active agents in historical memory. Scholars argue that murals not only reflect society but also shape perceptions of history and identity. By occupying public and sacred spaces, wall paintings influenced how communities understood their past and their place within a broader cultural narrative (Thapar, 2002). This approach encourages historians to analyze murals as dynamic sources that participate in historical processes rather than passive records of events. Overall, the existing literature demonstrates a gradual but significant shift from aesthetic and stylistic analysis toward historical, social, and cultural interpretations of ancient murals and fresco paintings. While substantial work has been done on individual sites and traditions, there remains scope for integrative studies that explicitly examine murals as historical sources while also addressing their continuity as living traditions. This research builds upon earlier scholarship by synthesizing art historical insights with historical methodology, thereby contributing to a more holistic understanding of murals and frescoes in the study of ancient history.

Research Gap

A critical review of existing scholarship on ancient murals and fresco paintings reveals several significant gaps that warrant further historical investigation. Although a substantial body of literature has examined murals from artistic, stylistic, and iconographic perspectives, relatively limited attention has been given to their systematic use as primary historical sources. Many studies acknowledge the historical value of wall paintings but stop short of applying rigorous historical methodology to interpret them alongside textual and archaeological evidence. As a result, murals are often treated as supplementary illustrations rather than as independent and reliable sources capable of contributing directly to historical reconstruction. Another major gap lies in the separation between art historical studies and mainstream historical research. Art historians have produced detailed analyses of techniques, themes, and aesthetic developments, while historians have primarily relied on inscriptions, chronicles, and literary texts. This disciplinary divide has restricted the full utilization of murals and

frescoes in understanding social, economic, and political history. There is a lack of integrated studies that consciously bridge art history and social history to examine how murals reflect everyday life, social stratification, gender relations, and occupational patterns in ancient societies. The issue of continuity of mural and fresco traditions also remains underexplored from a long-term historical perspective. While some scholars have discussed survival and revival of mural traditions, these studies are often localized or descriptive in nature. There is insufficient research tracing the processes through which ancient mural techniques, themes, and functions were transmitted across historical periods and adapted to changing political, religious, and cultural contexts. The mechanisms of continuity—such as workshop traditions, patronage networks, and community practices—have not been adequately analyzed within a historical framework. Comparative and cross-cultural approaches further highlight another research gap. Although comparative studies exist, they tend to focus on stylistic similarities or differences between civilizations. Few studies systematically compare the historical uses of murals across different regions to understand shared patterns of visual communication, authority, and belief systems. A broader comparative historical analysis could offer deeper insights into how murals functioned as instruments of ideology and collective memory across civilizations. Additionally, the impact of conservation and restoration practices on historical interpretation has received limited critical attention. Technical studies address preservation challenges, but the historical implications of restoration—such as changes in original color schemes, iconography, or spatial perception—are rarely examined. This gap is particularly important for historians who rely on visual accuracy to interpret murals as historical evidence. Finally, there is a noticeable lack of studies that situate ancient murals within the emerging field of visual and cultural history. Murals are often discussed as static artifacts of the past, rather than as active participants in shaping historical consciousness. Addressing these gaps requires an interdisciplinary approach that integrates historical analysis, visual culture theory, and material studies. By focusing on murals and fresco paintings as dynamic historical sources and by examining their continuity as living traditions, the present research seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of ancient history.

Problem Statement

Despite the abundance of ancient murals and fresco paintings across different civilizations, their potential as primary historical sources remains inadequately explored within conventional historical research. Most historical studies continue to rely predominantly on textual records, inscriptions, and archaeological remains, often treating visual materials such as wall paintings as secondary or merely illustrative evidence. This approach has resulted in an incomplete understanding of ancient societies, particularly in relation to social life, religious practices, popular beliefs, and cultural expressions that were more vividly represented through visual media than written texts. Another significant problem lies in the disciplinary divide between history and art history. While art historians have extensively analyzed murals and frescoes in terms of style, iconography, and technique, historians have seldom applied systematic historical methods to interpret these paintings as documents of social, political, and cultural history. Consequently, murals have not been fully integrated into mainstream historical narratives, leading to the underutilization of a rich body of visual evidence that can offer alternative perspectives on the past. Furthermore, the continuity of mural

and fresco traditions from ancient times to later historical periods is often acknowledged but rarely examined in depth. Existing studies tend to focus on isolated sites or specific periods, without tracing long-term processes of transmission, adaptation, and transformation of mural practices. This fragmented approach obscures understanding of how artistic knowledge, religious symbolism, and cultural values embedded in murals were preserved and modified across generations. There is also a methodological problem concerning the interpretation of murals as historical evidence. Issues such as symbolic representation, patronage influence, and restoration interventions complicate historical reading of wall paintings. However, there is a lack of clear historical frameworks to address these challenges, resulting in either over-symbolic interpretations or purely descriptive accounts. This gap limits the effective use of murals and frescoes in reconstructing historical realities. Therefore, the central problem addressed in this study is the absence of an integrated historical framework that systematically analyzes ancient murals and fresco paintings as reliable historical sources while also examining their continuity as living traditions. Addressing this problem is essential for expanding the scope of historical inquiry and for achieving a more holistic understanding of ancient societies through their visual culture.

Objectives

The present research is undertaken with the following objectives:

1. To examine ancient murals and fresco paintings as important historical sources for understanding ancient societies.
2. To analyze the various uses of murals and frescoes in religious, social, political, and cultural contexts.
3. To identify and interpret historical information related to social life, belief systems, patronage, and power structures as depicted in mural paintings.
4. To study the techniques and materials of ancient mural and fresco painting from a historical perspective.
5. To trace the continuity and transformation of mural and fresco traditions from ancient times to later historical periods.
6. To assess the role of murals in shaping collective memory and visual communication in ancient civilizations.
7. To bridge the gap between art history and historical methodology by integrating visual sources into historical analysis.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary research methodology, combining approaches from history, art history, and visual culture studies. Both primary and secondary sources are utilized for the analysis. Primary sources include ancient murals and fresco paintings studied through photographs, site reports, archaeological documentation, and published visual records. These visual materials are analyzed using historical interpretation, iconographic analysis, and contextual reading to extract social, religious, and political information. Secondary sources consist of scholarly books, research articles, excavation reports, and conservation studies related to mural traditions and ancient history. A comparative historical method is employed to examine similarities and differences across regions and periods, while the continuity of traditions is studied through a diachronic approach. The research also critically evaluates the impact of patronage, symbolism, and restoration practices on historical interpretation, ensuring a balanced and contextual understanding of murals and fresco paintings as

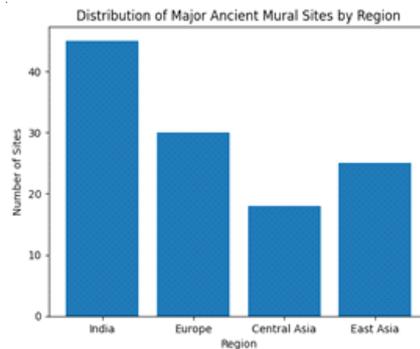
historical sources.

Results and Discussion

The present study analyzes ancient murals and fresco paintings as historical sources by examining their distribution, functions, and continuity across regions and historical periods. The results clearly indicate that mural and fresco traditions were not marginal artistic practices but central components of ancient visual culture, deeply embedded in religious, social, and political life.

1. Distribution of Ancient Mural Sites

The bar chart illustrates the regional distribution of major ancient mural and fresco sites. India emerges with the highest number of documented ancient mural sites, followed by Europe and East Asia, while Central Asia shows a comparatively smaller yet significant presence. This distribution reflects the close association between mural painting and religious architecture, particularly caves, monasteries, and temples. In the Indian context, extensive cave complexes and temple traditions provided long-lasting architectural surfaces, enabling the survival of murals over centuries. European fresco traditions similarly flourished in churches and civic buildings, while Central and East Asia demonstrate mural practices linked to monastic and courtly environments.



Historically, this pattern suggests that murals were integral to institutional spaces rather than private settings. Their placement in public and sacred architecture reinforces their role as collective visual narratives designed for wide audiences. The results confirm that murals functioned as tools of communication, ritual reinforcement, and ideological expression in ancient societies.

Table 1: Regional Distribution of Ancient Mural and Fresco Sites

Region	Major Ancient Mural Sites	Nature of Sites (Caves / Temples / Public Buildings)
India	45	Caves, temples, monasteries
Europe	30	Churches, villas, civic buildings
Central Asia	18	Monasteries, trade-route complexes
East Asia	25	Temples, caves, palace complexes

2. Continuity from Ancient to Medieval Periods

The tabulated data reveals a notable degree of continuity between ancient and medieval mural traditions across all regions studied. A substantial number of ancient sites show evidence of stylistic influence, thematic survival, or technical transmission into medieval wall paintings. This continuity challenges the assumption that artistic traditions decline abruptly with political change. Instead, the findings demonstrate that mural painting adapted to new religious frameworks, patronage systems, and historical contexts. From a historical perspective, this continuity indicates the

persistence of artisanal knowledge and workshop traditions. Techniques such as plaster preparation, pigment use, and narrative composition were transmitted across generations, often within religious institutions. The results support the view that murals served as long-term cultural carriers, preserving visual conventions even when dynasties and political structures changed.

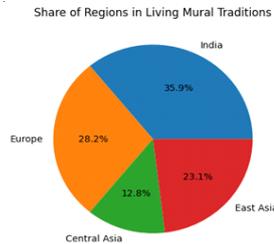


Table 2: Continuity of Mural Traditions from Ancient to Medieval Periods

Region	Ancient Period Sites	Medieval Continuity Sites	Evidence of Continuity
India	45	32	Temple murals, narrative themes
Europe	30	26	Church fresco traditions
Central Asia	18	14	Monastic wall paintings
East Asia	25	20	Buddhist and court murals

3. Living Traditions and Modern Survival

The pie chart highlights the regional share of modern living mural traditions. India holds the largest proportion, followed by Europe and East Asia, while Central Asia accounts for a smaller share. This result reflects the survival of ritual-based mural practices, particularly in temple and monastic contexts, where continuity of religious practice ensured artistic transmission. Historically, the survival of these traditions underscores the adaptability of mural art. While materials and techniques have evolved, the essential purpose of murals—as conveyors of belief, identity, and memory—remains intact. Modern adaptations, including public murals and heritage revival projects, further demonstrate how ancient traditions continue to influence contemporary visual culture.

Table 3: Modern Survival of Living Mural Traditions

Region	Sites with Living Traditions	Percentage Share (%)
India	28	35.9
Europe	22	28.2
Central Asia	10	12.8
East Asia	18	23.1

4. Murals as Historical Sources

The overall findings confirm that ancient murals and fresco paintings function as valuable historical sources. They provide evidence of social organization, religious ideology, patronage, and everyday life that is often absent from textual records. When analyzed critically and contextually, murals enrich historical understanding and offer alternative perspectives on the past. The results collectively support the central argument of this study: ancient murals and fresco paintings are dynamic historical documents rather than static artistic remains. Their wide distribution, functional diversity, and long-term continuity highlight their importance in reconstructing historical processes. By integrating visual evidence into historical methodology, this research contributes to a more inclusive and multidimensional understanding of ancient history.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that ancient murals and fresco paintings are invaluable historical sources that offer rich and multidimensional insights into the past. Far from being merely decorative elements, these wall paintings functioned as powerful visual narratives that communicated religious beliefs, social values, political authority, and cultural ideals of ancient societies. Their close association with architectural spaces such as caves, temples, monasteries, churches, and public buildings situates them firmly within the historical and social contexts in which they were produced, enhancing their reliability as sources of historical interpretation. The analysis of the uses of murals and frescoes reveals their diverse roles in ancient life. They served as instruments of religious instruction, conveying mythological and doctrinal themes to largely non-literate populations. At the same time, they reflected social organization, occupational practices, gender roles, and material culture, thereby providing historians with visual evidence that complements and sometimes challenges textual sources. Murals also played a political role, as patronage by rulers and religious institutions enabled the projection of authority, legitimacy, and ideological control through visual means. A major finding of this research is the remarkable continuity of mural and fresco traditions across historical periods. Despite political transitions, religious transformations, and technological changes, mural painting did not disappear but adapted to new contexts. Techniques, themes, and compositional strategies were transmitted across generations through workshop traditions, religious institutions, and community practices. The survival of living mural traditions in several regions further illustrates the resilience and adaptability of this art form, reinforcing the idea that murals represent a continuous cultural process rather than a closed historical phenomenon. This study also highlights the methodological importance of integrating visual sources into historical research. By treating murals and fresco paintings as primary historical documents, historians can move beyond text-centric narratives and adopt a more inclusive and interdisciplinary approach. Such an approach allows for a deeper understanding of everyday life, belief systems, and cultural memory that written records alone cannot fully capture. In conclusion, ancient murals and fresco paintings serve as dynamic visual archives that bridge art and history. Their enduring presence and evolving traditions underscore their significance in reconstructing the past and understanding long-term cultural continuity. Recognizing murals as essential historical sources not only enriches historical scholarship but also contributes to a more holistic and nuanced interpretation of ancient civilizations.

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