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COLLABORATION

Book Review

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Ellora: Cross-Fertilization of Style in Buddhist, Hindu and Jain Cave Temples

Authors: Deepanjana Klein and Arno Klein

Publisher: Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad, 2026

Ellora is the culmination of decades of engagement with the rock-cut caves of Ellora by Deepanjana Klein and her husband Arno. What began as love at first sight matured, through sustained study, a Mellon Foundation grant, and countless research journeys, into a profound way of seeing and understanding. Like a grand cru brought to full maturity, this volume distills admiration and scholarship to bring Ellora to life, accompanied by more than 200 luminous photographs by Arno Klein.

From the outset, the premise was to capture the essence of the cave temples near Aurangabad, Maharashtra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site carved into living rock between 600 and 1000 CE, and to examine the cross-fertilization of styles across Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain monuments. Ellora is the only cave temple site where Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain caves were excavated side by side, harmoniously clustered by religion yet deeply interconnected. Traditional scholarship proposed a largely sequential development aligned with dynastic patronage, with the Jain caves seen as the latest phase. The narrative presented here, however, reveals a far more intricate and interwoven story, rendering the book an unexpectedly compelling page-

turner.

The physical reality of the site, the dark corners of the caves, the crunch of cockroaches underfoot, the pungent scent of bat-inhabited spaces, adds a visceral dimension to Arno Klein’s reflections. Circumambulating the caves becomes not merely scholarly inquiry but embodied experience.

Deepanjana Klein’s decision to assemble a distinguished group of scholars to address the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain caves, along with issues of “intrusive” sculpture, incompleteness, carving processes, and economics, proves inspired. Such plurality of perspectives is ideally suited to a monument that defies linear interpretation. The humanity of Ellora emerges through this collaborative endeavor, mirroring the collective labor that first brought the site into being.

In his introductory essay, modestly termed a preface, Naman Ahuja establishes the intellectual foundation. He elucidates the literary and artistic underpinnings of iconography, the canons of proportion, and the communicative vocabulary of mudras, asanas, and divine attributes from lotus to trident. He demonstrates both shared conceptual frameworks and divergent interpretations within belief systems. Central to his argument are the aesthetic and spiritual concepts of *rasa* (joyous essence) and *ananda* (bliss), which illuminate the creative impetus behind Ellora and the almost unimaginable human effort required to conceive



↑ Interior stupa with Buddha triad; Vishvakarma, Cave 10. Image copyright, Photographs Credit by Arno Klein.



↑ Buddha number 4 with roughly-cut natural niche; Cave 2, left gallery. Image copyright, Photographs Credit by Arno Klein.

and sustain it over centuries. Guilds of artists moved between sites, fluent across religious idioms, explaining the stylistic continuities that permeate the complex. Patronage, flexible and pragmatic, fostered an artistic fluidity that transcended sectarian boundaries.

Ellora is above all a sculptural landscape, painstakingly carved into interior and exterior rock faces. Originally, however, it would have appeared as a vividly colored tableau, covered in stucco and paint. The misleadingly termed Cave 16 is in fact a monolithic architectural sculpture, hewn top-down from the mountainside. Few wall paintings survive, unlike in nearby Ajanta, yet the monument’s sculptural ambition remains overwhelming. The volume is dedicated to Walter Spink, mentor to Deepanjana Klein and towering scholar of Ajanta, whose seven-volume study redefined its chronology. A touching tribute by Stan Czuma underscores Spink’s enduring influence. Legend has it that Spink once hoped Klein would name her daughter Ajanta, instead she chose Ellora and thus the story unfolds.

Deepanjana Klein’s own essay traces five Hindu caves across three distinct phases, examining the evolution of style and faith. Persistent themes recur: early devotion to Shakti, the voluptuous Lajja Gauri and river goddesses, powerful

depictions of Durga killing the Buffalo demon (Mahisasuramardini), the marriage of Shiva and Parvati, and Ravana shaking Mount Kailash (Ravananugrahamurti). Variations in execution suggest multiple guilds working simultaneously, their differing “hands” visible across the site. The pièce de résistance remains Cave 16, the Kailash: an architectural form liberated from solid stone with virtually no margin for error. Nothing is structurally built; no column is truly load-bearing. The feat remains nearly inconceivable.

Nicolas Morrissey turns to the Buddhist caves, excavated between the late sixth and eighth centuries. He identifies both continuities with earlier traditions and striking innovations reflecting shifts in practice and the entrepreneurial acumen of monastic communities. Ellora functioned as a major pilgrimage hub, equipped with an expansive assembly hall and multistoried residential and ritual complexes. Particularly fascinating are the more than one hundred “intrusive” sculptures, Buddha triads, bodhisattvas, goddesses, inserted in seemingly unsystematic locations, generally accompanied by donor figures and inscriptions. These reveal a sophisticated economy of merit-making: sponsored cult images maintained by monastic communities, generating both karmic

benefit and sustained institutional income: a medieval model of spiritual endowment.

Lisa N. Owen challenges the conventional chronology that positions the Jain caves as the final phase. Through careful stylistic comparison, identifying shared pillar forms, throne motifs, and compositional strategies, she argues for contemporaneous development alongside the site's most celebrated Hindu and Buddhist monuments. This suggests not sequential replacement but synchronous dialogue. Artists navigated multiple religious vocabularies with remarkable fluency, articulating shared visual languages while preserving doctrinal distinctions. Religious diversity here fostered innovation rather than rivalry.

Vidya Dehejia addresses architecture and engineering, particularly the question of "finish." Some caves display uneven walls or incomplete refinements; others halt before final polish. She proposes that pre-modern India embraced a flexible conception of completion: once sanctum and enshrined image were realized, consecration could proceed. Perfection of the surface was secondary to sacred function. Working top-down, like peeling an onion, stone masons visualized the latent structure within the rock. Their technical audacity is matched by an expectation of imaginative engagement from the viewer. Dim interiors illuminated by oil lamps may have eased unfinished surfaces into transcendence. Yet mysteries remain: how were such vast excavations coordinated? Where did the removed stone go?

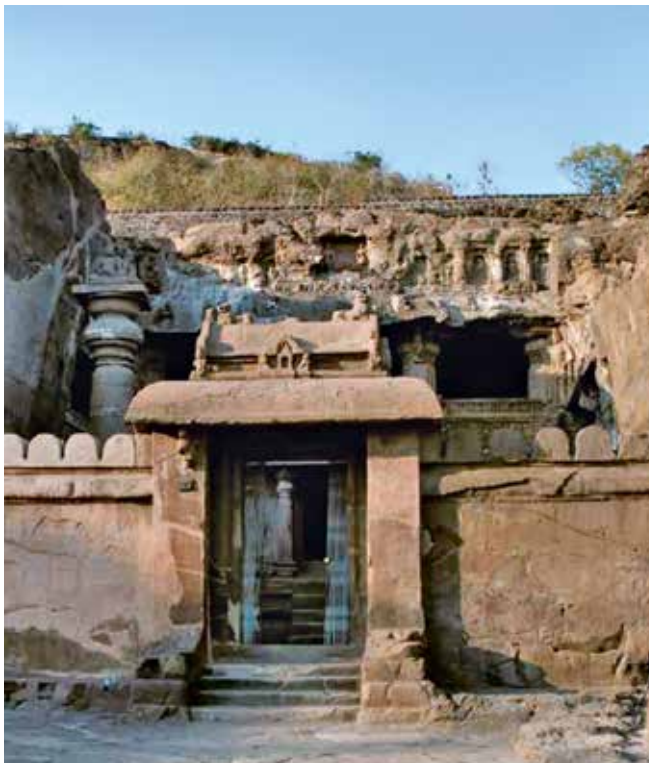
Pia Brancaccio situates Ellora within its broader regional context, demonstrating that artistic and religious cross-pollination extended beyond the site into Aurangabad and beyond. The complex emerges as a crucible of early medieval Indian cultural synthesis, compelling us to rethink rigid sectarian categories and recognize a more nuanced landscape of coexistence and exchange.

The volume concludes with a compelling archival postscript. From Thomas Daniell's aquatints to early photographs and the watercolors of the young M.F. Pithawalla, these materials chart not only the physical history of Ellora but its evolving reception across centuries and cultures. They reveal successive layers of interpretation—each generation encountering the monuments anew.

Like the caves themselves, this book rewards sustained contemplation. It invites us not merely to observe Ellora, but to dwell within it and to savour its essence with enduring wonder.



↑ Manatsabha Kailash, Cave 16, north courtyard.



↑ View of Rock-Cut Gateway leading into the Indra Sabha, Cave 31.

Book Review

EPSITA HALDER



Unmyth: Works and Worlds of Mithu Sen

Editor: Irina Aristarkhova

Publisher: Chemould Prescott in collaboration with Mapin Publishing, 2024

Unmyth: Works and Worlds of Mithu Sen is an exemplary volume presenting the first comprehensive study of Mithu Sen's artwork, spanning more than two decades. During this span, the artist has experimented with form, medium, and technique to create a dangerously evocative repertoire. Sen herself defines this as UN – a libertarian freedom, a linguistic tool, an extra-textual being that defies all that is normative and hierarchical. The book offers a splendid and expansive archive of her work, allowing the reader to map her UN, entrenched in her art as both condition and concept, as forms of multiple becoming, deconstructing all that is prior and primordial.

When a single volume seeks to encompass the oeuvre of a visual artist like Mithu Sen – one who persistently undefines the norms of poetics and aesthetics through her own unmyths – it inevitably encounters the tension between representation as a viable mode of communication and the unlanguage of the unworld the artist creates, dismantles, and reimagines. Yet UNMYTH, meticulously edited by Irina Aristarkhova and exquisitely designed by Anusha Yadav, aspires to become a sensory object in itself. This ambition is realised through the use of two of Sen's signature colours – jet black and carmine red – which serve as the book's structural and optical axes.

As these colours reverberate from lettering to page, from section divider to section divider, the text unfolds along angular trajectories. Lines traverse blank spaces, emulating the artist's gestures on her canvases; midway interruptions of semi-opaque pages with horizontal bars blur and reveal what lies beneath, simultaneously concealing and exposing. From colour codes to layout, from the interplay of fonts – solid and delicate – to the sudden eruption of a single red letter amidst a block of black text (recalling Sen's word-art I CUNT IMAGINE, 2010), and the underlined letters inviting the reader to decipher an unknown code – the book, heavy and voluptuous, creates a home for the artist's work, which itself thrives in unhome.

Following the contents, three consecutive pages offer three forms of self-expression of Sen, connecting distinct layers of the artist's being and blurring the boundaries between her multiple selves. The first is an image from a lecture-performance – the artist's silhouette against a glaring red screen lined in black, inscribed with white text: 100 (UN)SILENT WAYS (2019). This is followed by her critical philosophy of the UN, which governs the poetics and politics of her multilayered art and intimate life. The third presents an image of the artist's studio bookshelf, dotted with artefacts and knick-knacks collected from across the globe, drawing the reader closer to the artist as a living presence – to the microcosmic bricolage of her private world. The juxtaposition of these three pages sets the tone for the book's multidiscursive structure, within which Sen's precarious artistic journey, her vast and menacing unworld, and her self-conceptualisation of her practice as Unmyth or Mything the Myth are intricately situated.

The book comprises five essays by renowned scholars and curators who have collaborated with Sen in her international exhibitions and witnessed her continual processes of self-questioning and self-refashioning through evolving media, transformations of form, and technical experimentations that take dramatic, even disquieting, somersaults. The essays, written by Sushmita Chatterjee, Karin Zitzewitz, Irina Aristarkhova, Nancy Adajania, and Max Delany, are interwoven with a fictional interview authored by Sen herself, in which she splits into five distinct personae to engage in conversations with and introspections on with fictionalised historical characters and sometimes, a deliberate, biting rejection to engage. These contributors trace Sen's two-decade-long journey across hundreds of exhibitions, projects, lecture-demonstrations, word-art, and performances, situating her practice within a broader conceptual and art-historical framework, while focusing on five central themes. Richly referenced with interviews and curatorial notes from past exhibitions, these essays deepen the reader's understanding of the artist's evolving vision and philosophy.