

## INTRODUCTION

THE practice of decorating the interiors of shrines by painting is of great antiquity, reaching back perhaps to prehistoric ages, when cave-dwellers drew on their walls subjects of, to us, unknown significance. The paintings in Crete, in the tomb chambers of Egypt and Etruria, in Pompeii, in the temples of Dura-Europos, and in numberless other places in the Middle East and the Orient carry on the tradition with a continuity persisting down to the present time.

With progress in the study of archaeology we come to realize that the tracing of origins is but seeking the source of the infinite. Evidence accumulates to show that intercourse between peoples in past ages was earlier and greater than was formerly realized. No natural barriers, whether on land or sea, seem to have been great or awful enough to prevent contact of different communities and the resultant exchange of ideas. And nowhere has there been more complex fusion than in north-west India and Central Asia: and it still develops. It is usual to attribute to Greek inspiration much that they themselves acquired from outside, moulded to their exquisite taste and judgement, and passed on. That art, as developed in Greece and modified in Persia and Rome, had certain, even considerable, influence on the art of Buddhist India and particularly in the regions lying to the north, there is clear evidence. But there was also native genius, skilful to adapt these influences with discrimination and often with keen artistic sense, as shown by examples of sculpture and architecture.

How early and whence the practice of wall painting reached India, Tibet, Central Asia, and China, or whether these lands originated their own art, there is not sufficient historical evidence to determine. Existing fragments still adhering in patches on the walls, or fallen and scattered in the accumulated dust and plaster on the floor of ruined shrines, attest by the facile technique a long period of development of the craft and its practice by hands used to the work and familiar with the procedure, but showing varying degrees of skill in drawing. The many examples still surviving of early painting in both caves and free-standing shrines are evidence, too, that the decorator's industry must have been extensive and, by the quantity of work of indifferent quality, that many prentice hands were employed. Occasional traces of an earlier painting underneath the later one, the earlier work being generally superior in all respects to that which covered it, is further evidence of previous prolonged evolution of the art.