

Low Light Photography of Paintings

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I have recently demonstrated through my low light photography of important bodies of ancient paintings in several locations that:

1. It is possible to take highly accurate photographs in conditions of low light. Thus, major bodies of paintings which are in dark interiors (where strong lights are not allowed by archaeological and other authorities) may be photographed and made available for the world to appreciate and study.

In this manner the paintings of the Buddhist caves of Ajanta in India (second century BC to sixth century AD) have been comprehensively documented. These represent to pinnacle of Indian achievement in the art of painting throughout the centuries and are an important fountainhead of all the Buddhist art of Asia.

Similarly the tenth century Chola paintings and 17th century Kayak paintings in the narrow and dark confines of the inner ambulatory of the Brhadisvara temple at Tanjore in South India, have been comprehensively photo-documented. Most of these were completely unseen by scholars and this photography has led to fundamental changes in the understanding of the historical development of painting in India.

The paintings in the Buddhist monasteries of Ladakh in the Indian Himalayas (at altitudes between 11,500 to 14,000 feet above sea-level), are for the most part not photographed and therefore unavailable for scholarly study. (Only the monastery of 'Alchi' has been partly documented.) The comprehensive documentation of these paintings has been recently taken up by me and my colleague, and is expected to provide valuable material for the study of the transitions in Buddhist art as it moved from India to Tibet and China.

2. The photographs taken under these low light conditions are found to be very far superior to those taken in the strong lights/ashes as is conventionally done. Museum curators and scholars in the USA, UK, Japan, Hong Kong, India and other countries have responded enthusiastically to the

much superior quality of this method of photography. As in the case of Ajanta, experts are unanimous that they have never before seen the details and colours as clearly as in these slides.

Applications for Museums and Archives

Conservation experts have pointed out that this non-destructive method of photography without strong lights is very useful for photography of works of art/old documents and scrolls, etc. in museums and archives worldwide.