

Gandhara Art

Reference

Rafi- us Samad, *'The Grandeur of Gandhara : The Ancient Buddhist Civilization of the Swat, Peshawar, Kabul and Indus Valleys,'* (Algora Publishing, New York, 2011)

Background

The **Gandhara** civilization and its culture flourished during the first four centuries of the Common Era in the valleys of the Swat, Kabul and Indus Rivers.

Gandhara was suddenly exposed to the outside world between the 6th century BCE and 6th century C.E. through a series of invasions from mighty conquerors and empire builders. In the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, the Persians under Cyrus and Darius crossed the Khyber Pass to establish two Persian satrapies, one in the Peshawar Valley and the other in the Taxila region. Between 327 and 323 BCE, Alexander the Great battled with the Aspasian, Gourian and Assakan tribes of Bajaur, Dir and Swat, opening this region to subsequent Greek cultural influences through the Bactrian Greeks and the Hellenized Scythians, Parthians and Kushans, who ruled Gandhara from the 2nd century BCE till the 5th century CE.

6 BCE- Persians – two Persian satrapies in Peshawar valley and Taxila

327 BCE –Alexander the Great battled with tribes of Bajaur, Dir and Swat –Greek influence
Bactria came under– the Greeks-i) Seleucids ii) Bactrian Greeks

Sakas- Scythians- Parthians- Kushans – Gandhara from 2nd BCE TO 5th CE.

During the 150-year of rule by the Greek Dynasties a large number of Greeks settled in Bactria. Although the Greeks remained very much in minority in Bactria, they exercised exclusive control over this region and they had a major influence in the culture of this region. Greeks became the official language of Bactria, beautiful coins with portraits of Greek rulers and deities from the Greek Pantheon became the common currency, and Greek temples were constructed employing Greek styles of architecture and decorations.

This situation prevailed till mid-second century BCE, when the Sakas from the Tarim Basin moved to Sogdia and then conquered Greater Bactria and put an end to the Greek rule in this region. The end of Greek rule in Bactria, although it did not result in any major changes in the official setup of Bactria, gradually increased the participation of the ethnic Bactrians in everyday affairs. The Sakas did not possess any culture of their own and lacked the ability to install a proper administrative system of their own. So very conveniently they stepped into the shoes of

the Bactrian Greeks and retained their system of administration. But there was a major difference in the private lifestyle of the Sakas. They felt much closer to the ethnic Bactrians and adopted their language in their private lives. They also began to worship Iranian and Mesopotamian deities.

Around 100 BCE the Yueh-chih conquered Bactria and drove the Scythians southwards to Gandhara. During the period 100 BCE to 40 CE, conditions in and around Bactria remained unsettled as the five factions of Yueh-chih battled against each other for supremacy. But in this period all the Yueh-chih tribes had an opportunity to adjust themselves to the environment prevailing in the Bactrian region.

By the time Kujula Kadphises achieved supremacy over the other Yueh-chih tribes and established the Kingdom of the Kushans in Bactria, the Kushans had adopted Bactrian as their spoken language and started worshipping a number of Iranian and Mesopotamian deities. Even Kanishka, who was the greatest patron of the Buddhist institutions and sponsored the Fourth Buddhist Council on the advice of his Buddhist advisors, did not convert to Buddhism, at least not in the sense such a conversion is understood in the sub-continent and in the west.

Although by the time Kanishka had ascended the throne, the Kushans had already been well-established in Gandhara for almost 70 years, they had made no attempt to learn Gandhari-Kharoshthi. They were influenced by Buddhism to some extent but none of them actually converted to Buddhism.

After Kanishka became emperor, a major change took place with regard to use of languages, scripts and portraits of deities on coins. Kanishka discarded the use of Greek as well as Kharoshthi legends on the coins and instead started using legends in Bactrian language employing Greek alphabets. Also portraits or symbols of as many as 33 different deities appeared on his coins. Portrait of Buddha also appeared on some of his coins. This practice of employing only Bactrian language legends on the coins was continued by all Kushan rulers, who followed Kanishka, including Huvishka and Vasudeva.

ART

The dominating influence in the culture of Gandhara was that of Mahayana Buddhism. The institutions developed by the Buddhist establishment in Gandhara catered to the spiritual as well as the social needs of the people. The sangharamas assumed the responsibility for promoting healthy lifestyles. In the large number of sangharamas, which were constructed all over Gandhara during the Kushan period, special attention was given to making these places physically attractive and entertaining for the visitors. To fulfill this requirement enormous attention was given to the development of beautiful stone sculptures, which were extensively employed to decorate the sangharamas.

This special form of sculptural art developed in Gandhara, became popular in other regions of the Kushan Empire as well. Sculptors in far off places such as Termez in Uzbekistan and Ashkabad in Turkmenistan, and Fondukistan and Kakrak in Bamiyan Valley of Afghanistan

adopted the styles, themes and compositions employed in the Buddhist sculptures produced in Gandhara. Gandhara developed images of Buddha and Bodhisattvas on the pattern of images of Greek gods and incorporated Greco-Persian features in the sculptures such as folds of robes and hairstyles. These styles and features strongly influenced the styles and features employed in images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, which were used in the stupas and temples in other regions of the Kushan Empire.

The seeds of the evolution of the concept of Bodhisattva were sown by the Mahasanghikas when they proclaimed that the path of enlightenment was open to all Buddhists, monks as well as other practitioners of the faith. This led to the crystallization of the view that through the cultivation of the six perfections, namely generosity, morality, patience, vigor, meditation (contemplation) and wisdom, even a lay Buddhist could become a Bodhisattva. Amitabha, who was initially a lay Buddhist, then a monk, then a Bodhisattva, and finally became a celestial Buddha. Avalokitesvara.

During the Fourth Buddhist Council convened by Kanishka in Jalandhar around 128 CE, the Council meetings led to the compilation and approval of the Mahayana Sutras by a Sangha comprising of 500 Buddhist Sarvastivadin scholars. The beautiful and peaceful surroundings, in which the Buddhist monks practiced their religion, sharpened the senses of the artists and elevated the spirits of the devotees. They provided the Gandhara artists the inspiration to produce works of art of extraordinary depth.

In the development of these extraordinary pieces of art, the Gandhara artists also derived benefit from the rich artistic traditions of Greece, Persia and South Asia. New styles, new types of compositions, new patterns, fabulous, new mythological creatures, new types of flora and fauna, new motifs, new symbols, new type of architectural elements,

In the Greek cultural traditions, carved images of gods and other mythological figures always occupied a central place. These images continued to be the dominant feature of the Greek dominated hybrid Greco-Persian art, which emerged in West Asia after Alexander's invasion.

Therefore, when the Hellenistic sculptors were commissioned to produce Buddhist sculptures, the thought of introducing the images of Buddha must have come very naturally to them. Buddhist images first began to emerge in Gandhara during the rule of Saka-Parthians initially in the form of heads of Bodhisattvas.

Under the Kushans, Buddha's statues and sculptured images in reliefs and panels began to appear in ever-increasing numbers in Taxila as well as in other regions of Gandhara. During the reign of Kanishka and Huvishka images of Buddha modelled on Greek gods and dressed in Greek style, became the most prominent feature of Gandharan Sculptural Art.

The statues of Greek gods have been modified to emphasize the spiritual qualities of Buddha. The bold straight looking features of Greek gods have been replaced by the cool and calm figure, with half-closed eyes looking downwards. The statue obviously belongs to the later period of

Gandhara Art when most of the important features of Buddha statues were canonized. Unlike the earlier statues produced in Gandhara, in this statue Buddha has no moustache, his hair are in the form of tight ringlets instead of the sun-rays type of wavy hair combed backwards, and beneath Buddha's feet is a beautifully decorated pedestal.

The essential characteristics of the Buddha image which came to be standard in Gandhara were;

- ◆ Almond-shaped eyes representing Buddha Sakyamuni's descent from the Licchavi clan. With half-closed eyes, the eyelids are shaped like the leaves of the lotus or lily.

- ◆ The Ushnisha, the 'bouffette' or bun, into which Buddha's hair was tied at the top of his head, to reflect the enlightened nature of Buddha's personality.

The Urna, the small circular mark in the center of the forehead, called the Eye of Wisdom.

- The exaggerated length of the ears due to extended earlobes.

the Nimbus, a symbol of deification, located behind the head of Buddha.

- The use of hand gestures to present Buddha in various modes.

Ushnisa or bun of hair at the top of Buddha's head is part of all image of Buddha produced in Gandhara. It is the symbol of Buddha's Enlightenment. It is viewed as a source of power that remains in spiritual contact with the heavens and in this way enlightens the mind of Buddha.

Symbolic hand gestures were most effectively employed by Gandhara artists to recall events in the life of Buddha and to convey the deeper meaning associated with the event. These hand gestures, referred to as mudras, were readily understood by the common devotees to denote Buddha in the meditating, preaching, wish granting, protection and other such modes.

Three hand gestures dominate in the statues of Buddha in the Gandhara Region. These are the Dharmachakra Mudra, Dhyana Mudra, and the Abhaya Mudra.

The fine schist stone carved standing figure of the Buddha in Greco-Roman robes.

The Mahayana sutras, which form the basis of the Buddhist sculptural art in Gandhara, began to appear in the last century BCE. In the two centuries intervening between the initial appearance of the Mahayana sutras and the appearance of the Bodhisattva images in Gandhara, a vast body of scriptures was compiled by the scholar-monks, which provided the characteristics of the Bodhisattva. It was left to the artists and artisans of Gandhara to develop a physical image of the Bodhisattvas, which reflected the appearance and spiritual qualities ascribed to the Bodhisattvas in the Mahayana sutras.

As against the images of Buddha, who are invariably shown in monastic robes, the Bodhisattvas are shown in princely garbs and wearing a wealth of jewelry—earrings, necklaces, armlets, bracelets, scarves and belts. In stead of being tied in the form of ushnisa, the tresses are often shown flying around or falling on the shoulders.

According to the Mahayana School of Buddhism, there are numerous Bodhisattvas, human as well as divine. The Bodhisattvas most frequently represented in Gandhara sculptures are Maitreya, Avalokitesvara, and Vajrapani.

The sacred lotus is an important spiritual symbol in Buddhism. It represents purity, divine wisdom, and progress from the lowest to the highest state of consciousness.

In Gandhara sculptures, the Enlightenment of Buddha is symbolized by the emergence of lotus from the murky darkness at the bottom of the pond. As the lotuses grow out of the water pure and clean, bringing beauty, so does the Buddha seated on a lotus pedestal transcend the troubles of human existence, leaving behind the sea of pain in human existence.

As per Mahayana traditions, the Bodhisattvas, when taking the Bodhisattva vow before Buddha, carried a lotus flower or a stem of the lotus in their hand, the lotus signifying the Bodhisattvas commitment to seeking enlightenment. Based on this tradition, numerous images of Bodhisattvas were produced in the Gandhara Region in which the Bodhisattva is shown holding the lotus in his hand.