

Changing images of Buddha:

From belief to image.



The human image of the Buddha doesn't occur in the early centuries of Buddhist Art. He is portrayed in non-human form, as a tree, empty throne, stupa or wheel. Sometimes as feet.

Several explanations for the absence of human images of the Buddha. One is the reluctance to give human form to religious figures.

But more recently the suggestion that these images may actually represent places of pilgrimage, sites of events associated with the Buddha rather than the specific event.

Pilgrimage sites do not require the presence of the Buddha. These images may celebrate the auspicious sites.



The debate over when the first images occurred is ongoing but it can be said that image-making was known by the third century BCE with the first images of the Buddha appearing by the first century BCE. Sources are Indian, a combination of ancient meditative, yogic ideals and earlier yaksha figures.



Seal with seated figure in yogic posture, from Mohenjo-daro, Pakistan, ca. 2600–1900 BCE. Steatite coated with alkali and baked, approx. 1 3/8" X 1 3/8". National Museum, New Delhi.

The represent the practice in Indian art of using images as protectors and emblems of abundance...

Female attendant, 1st century, India.

The yakshi remained prominent in Indian art but these voluptuous females seldom appear in Buddhist art unless under direct Indian influence.



Yakshi from Didarganj (ca 300 B.C.)

The development can be traced from Ashoka's columns, continued by narrative reliefs, the jataka tales and events of the life of the Buddha on the gates of the stupas and then the numerous male and female fertility images.

The fertility figures became especially prominent during the Kushan period (late 1st cent BCE to late 3rd cent CE)...



Equally powerful, the male yaksha was less consciously sensual.

They provided the ideal for subsequent images in the Buddhist pantheon, including the Buddha and Bodhisttvas.



These are images of prosperity associated with agrarian cultures.

They provide the models for the earliest images of the bodhisattva or even the Buddha.



The Development of Images

One reason for the popularity of image-making are linked to the traditional Buddhist desire to earn merit. In this case merit is accumulated by causing images to be created.

While wandering monks and priests had little use of images, lay followers needed both guidance and visual reminders...

This is important. Why?



The Kushan kingdom was centered in two areas, around Mathura (in northern-central India) and in Gandhara.

In the Mathura region there appeared sandstone images of the Buddha that looked like the *yaksha* figures.



The growing schism resulting in the Mahayana school, created the need for additional images. This process was aided by the political and cultural changes brought about by the mixture of people migrating into the area...mostly the Kushan people from Central Asia.

Buddha, late 1st Century, Mathura region

The Kushan kingdom was centered in two areas...one around Mathura, in the north-central India and the other in Gandhara.

In Mathura there appeared sandstone images of the Buddha, similar to the yaksha figures on Bharhut and Sanchi.

Capturing the ideals of yogic control...containers of the ‘vital breath’, rather than replicas of the physical body.

Buddha seated on lion throne, from Mathura, India, second century CE. Red sandstone, 2' 3 1/2" high. Archaeological Museum, Muttra.



The Indian Buddha

image portrays the traditional figure of the meditative yogin, transcendent in mental powers but part of the world. At the same time he is surrounded by images of radiance and abundance... the sun disc and trees, the throne supported by lions, and two attendants emphasize his royal position. While the humble robe, yogic posture and gesture of reassurance embody the spiritual message.







Standing Buddha, Mathura

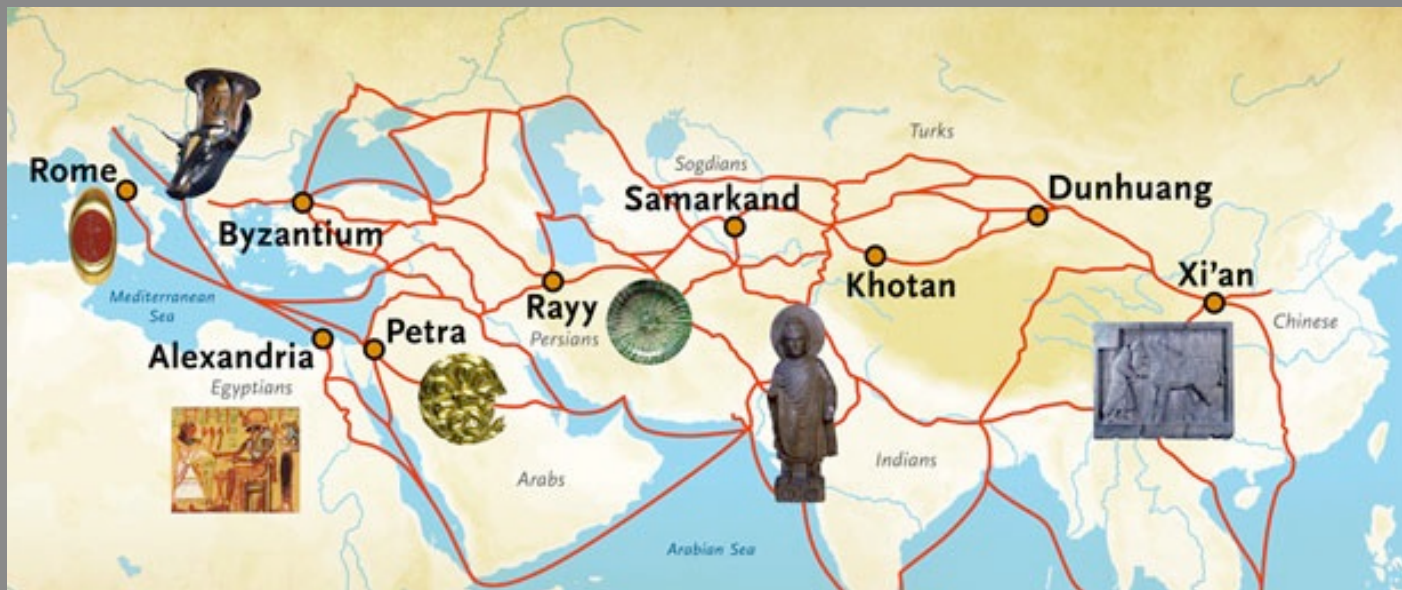
Seated Buddha preaching first sermon, from Sarnath, India, second half of fifth century. Tan sandstone, 5' 3" high. Archaeological Museum, Sarnath.



By contrast...the Gandharan Buddha, despite having many of the same attributes---the lion throne, the yogic posture and radiant nimbus---remains a mixture of Roman styles. Most striking is the toga, an inappropriate garment for the climate of India...and the facial features which indicate an interest in realism.

Meditating Buddha, from Gandhara, Pakistan, second century CE. Gray schist, 3' 7 1/2" high. Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh.







At the same time, in the north-western region of Gandhara, the area where Alexander the Great ended his eastern march, there appeared a different stylistic version of the Buddha.





Two examples of Greek Art. Notice the attention to naturalistic depictions of the human body.



Roman art was basically stolen from Greece. So Roman art indicates these same tendencies.

Sarcophagus of a philosopher, ca. 270–280 CE. Marble, approx. 4' 11" high. Vatican Museums, Rome.



Gandharan art continued throughout most of the first millennium in Afghanistan and at least until the end of the 18th century. The area had become a second holy land for Buddhist, visited by pilgrims from south and east Asia, enhanced by the belief that early events in the Buddha's life had occurred there.

Standing Buddha and
Meditating Buddha, from Gandhara, Pakistan, second century CE.
Gray schist, 3' 7 1/2" high. Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh.



These images of the Fasting Buddha indicate the influence of the Greco-Roman style with an emphasis on naturalism. Emaciated Buddha, 2nd-3rd Century, Kushan



Many of the earliest images of the Buddha were accompanied by pairs of bodhisattvas (enlightened beings), most of who later became the focus of their own cults.



Bodhisattvas had wealth and affluence and were shown with beautiful robes, jewels, etc. in addition objects were often carried or displayed to identify each.





Bodhisattva, Pakistan, 2nd/3rd Century

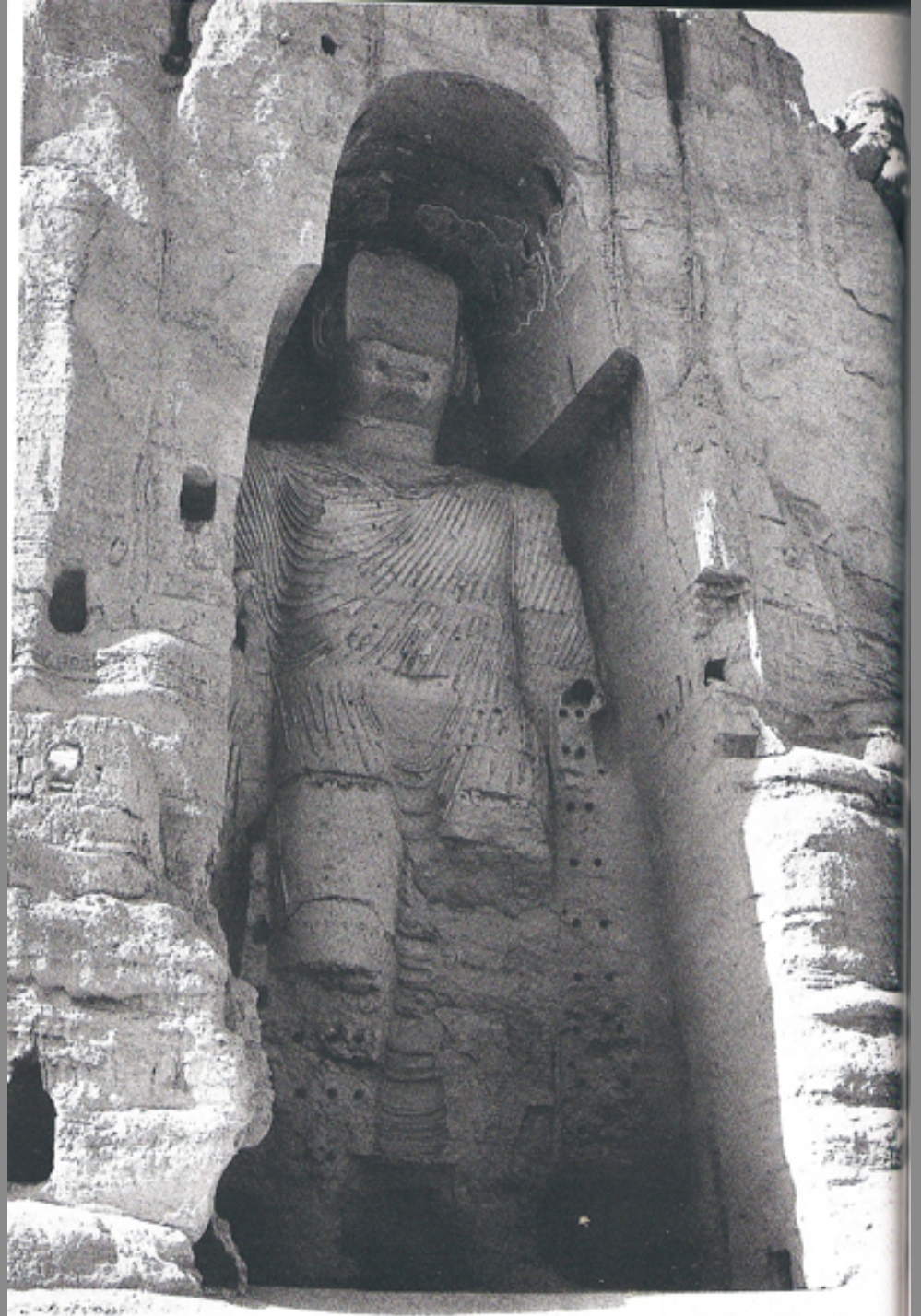


As interest and worship of Bodhisattvas increased, also the idea of the Buddha as a truly celestial figure grew.

As a result of the cosmic view of Mt. Meru as linked with the heavens, the appearance of the Colossal Buddhas in India and throughout northern countries from Afghanistan to Japan are seen.

Originally gilded with gold and copper masks, two colossal images from Afghanistan are most spectacular, visible to pilgrims from miles away. The sense of splendor was enhanced by wall paintings.

Colossal Buddha, 5th-6th century, Afghanistan, destroyed in 2001 by the Taliban.



Different from that of a humble, meditative teacher, the Buddha had become an awesome, transcendent vision....reflecting the importance Mahayana Buddhism placed on the heavenly realm even suggesting the rewards awaiting those who managed to be reborn in such a paradise.

Colossal Buddha, 5th century,
Kanheri, India



Gandhara and Mathura

- Examine the design traditions and influences in the Buddhist art from Gandhara.
- Understand why the Buddhist art from Mathura presents a different tradition.