

Buddhist and Hindu Art History

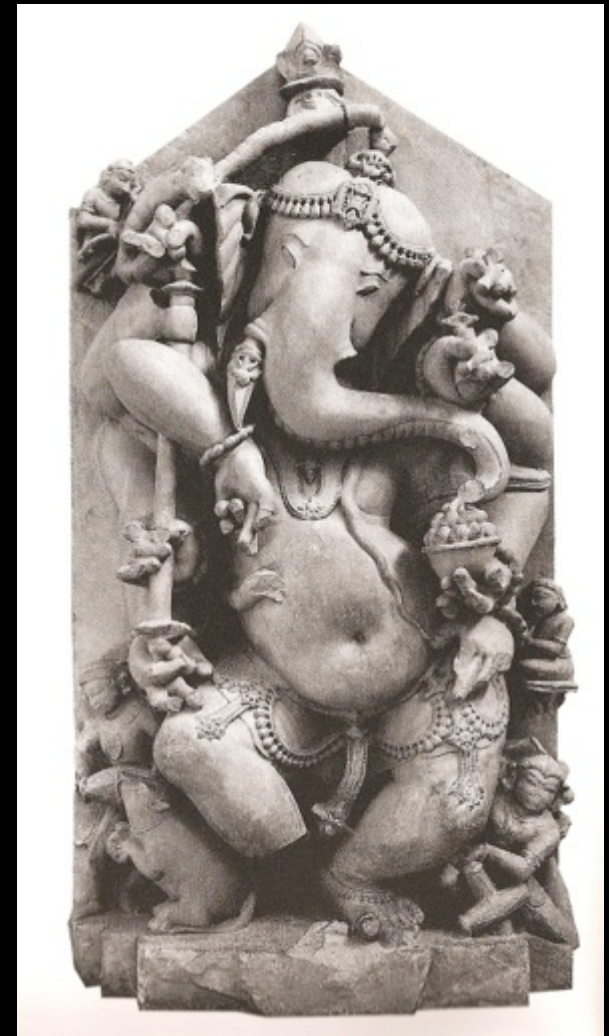
Images. Context. Meaning.

Art and Idea

The artwork we will discuss in this class was made for different reasons in different times.

Hinduism is a religion with a very long history based on ancient texts from before 2000 BCE. There are many gods and goddesses, some in the form of human beings, others with animal characteristics.

Buddhism as a belief system is much more recent than Hinduism. Growing out of Hindu tradition, Buddhism is based on the teaching of the historic Buddha who lived around 500 BCE.



Ganesha, Hindu.
The elephant headed god
who removes all obstacles.

Art and Idea

The artwork and architecture we analyze was made to support the beliefs. All images were made for a particular reason.

We live in a time and place that values self-expression. This is not the case as we analyze the Hindu and Buddhist images in this class.

Artists and/or artisans who created the images and sites did so based on particular norms and within the context of the belief.

Self-expression was not part of their mind-set. For this reason, images follow tradition.



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

Art and Idea

While many of the ideas and images will be new to you, the book, lectures and web links provide access to understanding.

We will focus on the images with the understanding that:

1. The meaning of Image is contextual.
2. The meaning of Image is constructed.
3. There are reasons why Images look the way they do.
4. All elements within a piece of art, sculpture, painting, architecture, have meaning.



This sculptural relief depicts a popular creation myth featuring Vishnu as Narayana who reclines on the serpent Ananta (Infinity) afloat the casual waters. As Narayana dreams, a lotus arises from his navel, bearing Brahma the personification of the creative principle inherent in Consciousness.

Let's break it down

1. The meaning of Images is contextual

Context includes original and subsequent historic and cultural information about an artwork.

Context includes:

The time, place, and culture in which a work of art was created, as well as information about when, where and how audiences interacted with the work.

It also includes:

Religious, political, social and economic characteristics, including patronage.

Ownership and other power relations.



Let's start with an example you may be more familiar with, Michelangelo's statue of David.

Time and Place: *Florence, 1501-4, Renaissance*

Religious and political meaning: *David is a figure from a story in the Christian Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible).*

Patron: *the Catholic Church.*

MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI, David, 1501–1504. Marble, 13' 5" high. Galleria dell' Accademia, Florence.

Context



These two images (one engraving and one sculpture) have similar subject matter.

Both depict a male and female, partially nude, in relation with each other.

However, it is the differences that provide the context.

The image on the left is an engraving from the 1600s. The subject is Adam and Eve, a story from the Hebrew Bible, incorporated into the Christian as the Old Testament.

The image on the right depicts a male and female in tender embrace. They are carved on a cave wall in India (that later became a Buddhist pilgrimage site) around 300 BCE (much earlier). Their meaning is unclear but likely relates to fertility as the idealized union of male and female energy.

Constructed

2. The content of Images is constructed for particular meaning.

Content in a work of art includes the visible subject matter: representative depictions such as, people, landscape, animals, and symbols for instance.

Content can tell a story (narrative), be symbolic, spiritual, historic, mythological, supernatural and/or propagandistic.

Content here is the seated Buddha.
See next slide for more.



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

Constructed

This sculpture represents the Historic Buddha seated in meditation. His eyes are closed and his hands are in the mudra of 'setting in motion the wheel of life (or law).'

There are many symbols to identify this person as the Buddha:

His elongated earlobes, his topknot of hair, his serene expression but mostly, beneath the seated figure we see a row of people (and deer) facing and praying toward a wheel.

All elements in this sculpture, including the heavenly beings flying above, refer to a story in the life of the Historic Buddha. We will read about this later.



The particular style used to depict the Buddha, smooth and slightly rounded was the convention of Indian sculpture at the time it was made.

Reasons for Construction

- Sometimes it's for devotion, a way for the faithful to feel closer to the deity or faith.
- Sometimes it's for educational purposes. Since most people were illiterate prior to the 17th century, images served to teach.
- Sometimes it's to establish or maintain power. Many powerful rulers used images to consolidate power within a group.
- Sometimes it's a function of history and habit, even when the specifics of the history have been forgotten.



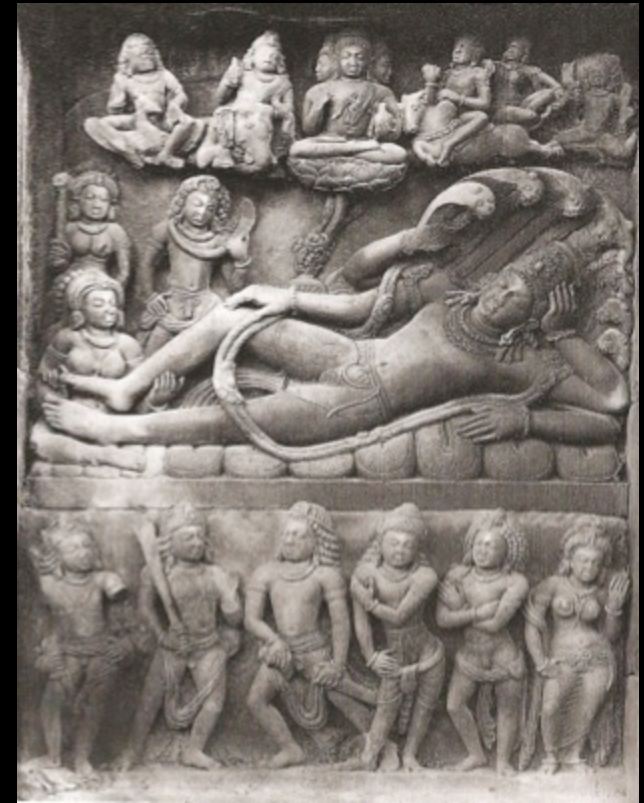
Statues like this, representing the historic Buddha, were devotional as well as educational.

Meaning

4. All elements within a piece of art, sculpture, painting, architecture, have meaning.

While contemporary artists may create 'art for art sake,' highlighting self expression of the individual artist, prior to Renaissance times (1400's) in Europe and much later in other cultures, art was made for a particular purpose and was designed to be clearly understood.

We will look at this a bit more later.



This sculptural relief depicts a popular creation myth featuring Vishnu as Narayana who reclines on the serpent Ananta (Infinity) afloat on the cosmic waters. As Narayana dreams, a lotus arises from his navel, bearing Brahma the personification of the creative principle inherent in Consciousness.

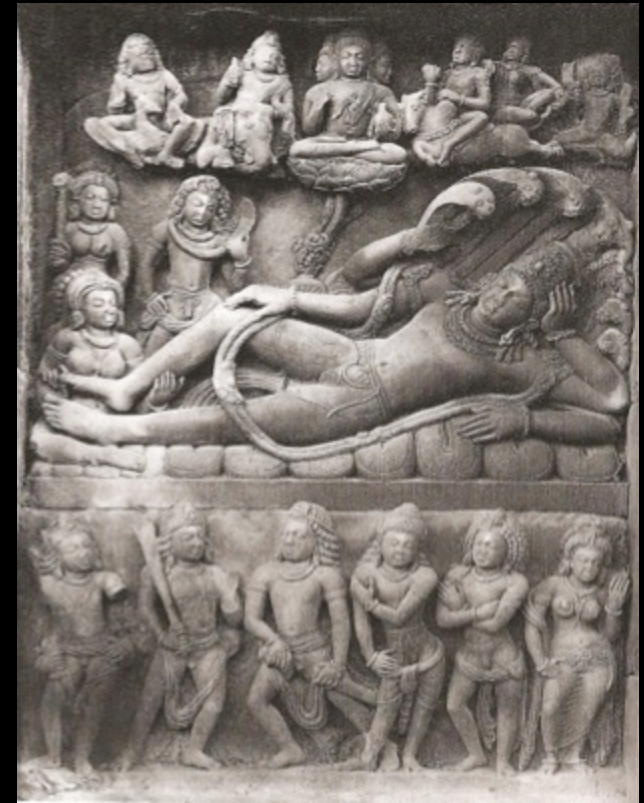
Meaning

4. All elements within a piece of art, sculpture, painting, architecture, have meaning

Because most of the artworks we encounter in this class are images of gods, goddesses or deities of some kind, they are made with great care and devotion.

The individuals, animals and symbols depicted in the works have particular characteristics, making them easily identifiable to a mostly illiterate audience.

Any Hindu practitioner would know this is Vishnu and would understand all the symbols and others in the image.



This sculptural relief depicts a popular creation myth featuring Vishnu as Narayana who reclines on the serpent Ananta (Infinity) afloat the casual waters. As Narayana dreams, a lotus arises from his navel, bearing Brahma the personification of the creative principle inherent in Consciousness.

Representations of the Gods

Next week we will look at Creation Stories or Myths of several civilizations.

Since we are analyzing the artwork of Hinduism and Buddhism to understand the culture, history and faith, we will explore the human impulse to use art to express notions of the divine.

Early humans, even before civilizations, worshiped the mother goddess. Fertility of both humans and the earth took the form of the female body.

Many gods and goddess have been represented in human form or as animal spirits or a hybrid of the two.



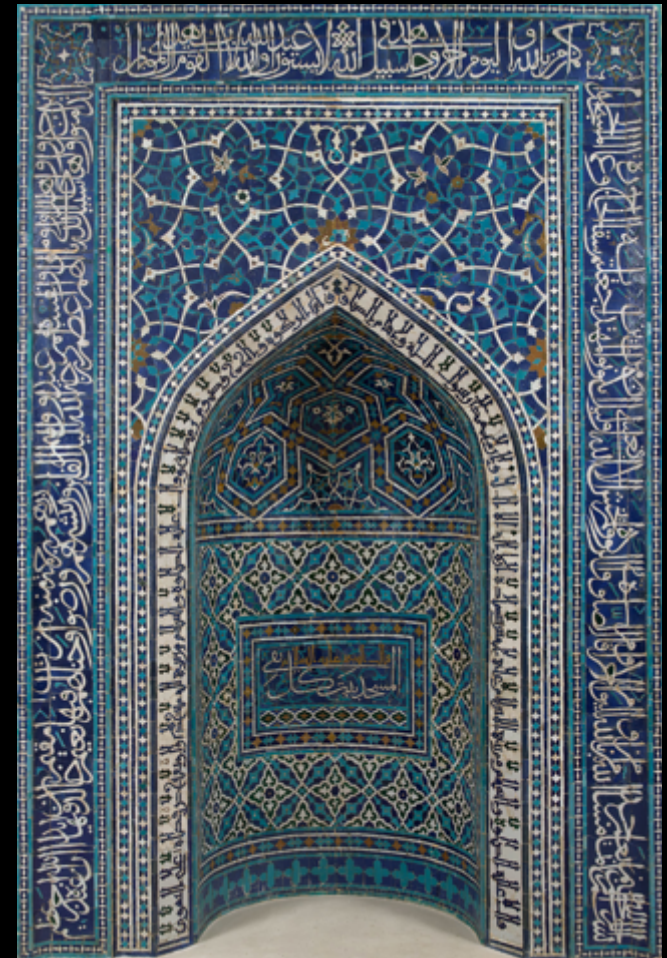
Inanna/Ishtar wearing a crown of horns, wings and a rainbow necklace with lions and owls, Sumer, Mesopotamia, Larsa period, c. 2000BCE. Terroacotta relief, 1' 8"

No images of gods

Islam discourages the making of images that might be worshiped as idols. Muslims use nonfigurative forms to contemplate God such as geometric and organic patterns, calligraphy and vegetable ornaments.

Judaism also teaches that divine power is so great and inconceivable that there is a prohibition against making images of God.

Even within Christianity there was a time early in the church, called the Iconoclastic Controversy, when images were banned. The fear was that the faithful would begin worshiping the images, as opposed to what they stood for. This would have been 'idolatry', breaking the first Commandment.



This is a piece of a wall from a mosque in Iran, 1354-55. It's the Mihrab, which is a prayer niche. The patterns and calligraphy from the Koran are made from ceramic tile.

It is now in the Metropolitan Museum.

Style

I want to do a quick introduction of style here so you can consider it as we go along.

Style in art refers to the way a work of art looks.

Style is often divided into general styles of a period, country or cultural group. We may talk about the Egyptian style or Cubism. Within each style there are characteristics that constitute the particular style.

In this class we will see the styles used to represent the same deities change significantly as we move through time and different cultures.



Two images of the Buddha.

Subjects (content) are the same, the historic Buddha. But the styles are different because one is Indian and one is from Japan.

Seated Buddha preaching first sermon, from Sarnath, India, second half of fifth century

Shakyamuni and two bodhisattvas, or Shaka triad, Horyuji kondo, Mara, Japan

Comparisons

All artwork we look at in this class is based on beliefs about life, death, and what it means. We might call this religion or belief system. But humans have wondered about this since the beginning of consciousness.

The first evidence archaeologists have to human consciousness is in burial sites when humans began burying their dead in particular ways, with evidence of ritual and meaning.

We all have beliefs. Maybe you don't think of yours very often. But I'm asking you to think of them here.

What are yours?

Where do they come from?



This is the reconstruction of a Neanderthal burial in La Chapelle-aux-Saints, France.

Comparisons

While there are many belief systems in the world, here in the West, the religious tradition is Judeo/Christian.

Because humans make art and because humans have shared ideas throughout history, we can see some similarities in some of our representations.

These are three different pieces of art. They all represent deities seated on a throne, either holding things in their hands or with hand gestures in a particular position.

They also have particular attributes or things they are wearing that identify them.

One is Jesus (Christian) from the front of a cathedral. One is the Buddha (Buddhist) and one is Vishnu (Hindu).



Ideas come from somewhere

You've already seen this image of the Buddha. Next week we will discuss this in more depth but here you can begin to see how symbols and ideas that were developed earlier in history can influence later ones.



This Buddha seated on lion throne, is from Mathura, India, second century CE.



This is a clay Seal with seated figure in yogic posture, from Mohenjo-daro, Pakistan, ca. 2600–1900 BCE.

This clay seal was created c. 2200 years prior to the statue of the seated Buddha to the left. The historic Buddha would not be born for about 1700 years. Yet, we see similarities in representation.

Ideas come from somewhere

Using the same seal we can also compare the interest in animals. Bulls and lions were very popular animal spirits that were used to empower humans and in the case of the Lion Capital below, stand in for the Buddha.



Lion capital of column erected by Ashoka at Sarnath, India, ca. 250 BCE.



This is a clay Seal with seated figure in yogic posture, from Mohenjo-daro, Pakistan, ca. 2600–1900 BCE.

This clay seal was created c. 2250 BCE.

The Lion capital was designed to be placed on top of a tall column used by King Ashoka to spread the teaching of the historic Buddha.

Both use animals.

Visual Literacy

This class is designed to help with understanding of the history of ideas through [Visual Literacy](#).

- You are all aware of what Literacy means.
- [Visual Literacy](#) is defined as the ability to understand, interpret and evaluate visual images.
- It is based on the idea that pictures can be 'read' and that meaning can be communicated through a careful reading.
- [Learning to read a picture or artwork will give you the ability to see intended or unintended meanings and begin to critique images you see.](#)

Object Based Analysis

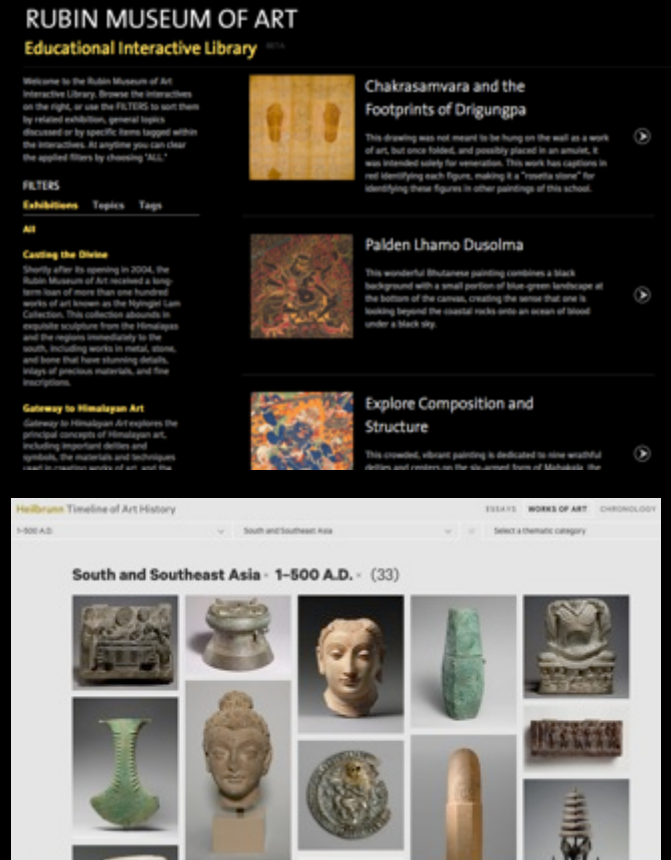
In this class you have weekly readings (usually in one of the books), a lecture, possibly web links to videos and an annotation assignment.

All are posted to the website each week.

Then, you have 4 Object Based Analysis papers, the first this week.

This first one will give you an opportunity to practice writing about an art object.

The two website I've given you are posted to the class website. You can choose your object from one of those.



NOTE:

These are the homepages of the Rubin Museum site and Met Museum site listed on the website for your assignment.

Rubin Museum Site

If you use the Rubin Museum site, once you decide which image you want to analyze, click on it. Example:

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART

Educational Interactive Library BETA

[BACK TO INTERACTIVES](#)

[LINKS](#)

[START OVER](#)



EXPLORE COMPOSITION AND STRUCTURE: PALDEN LHAMO DUSOLMA

Explore Composition and Structure

Palden Lhamo Dusolma

Bhutan; 19th century

Pigments on cloth

F1996.11.4 (HAR 440)

This wonderful Bhutanese painting combines a black background with a small portion of blue-green landscape at the bottom of the canvas, creating the sense that one is looking beyond the coastal rocks onto an ocean of blood under a black sky. The edges of clouds, smoke, flames, and rocks are highlighted in gold and form an irradiant setting for the black goddess, who, despite her dynamic, emits a sense of calm within this busy environment.

[CLICK THE PAINTING TO EXPLORE](#)

Object Based Analysis

Click on the main image and this page comes up with new information.

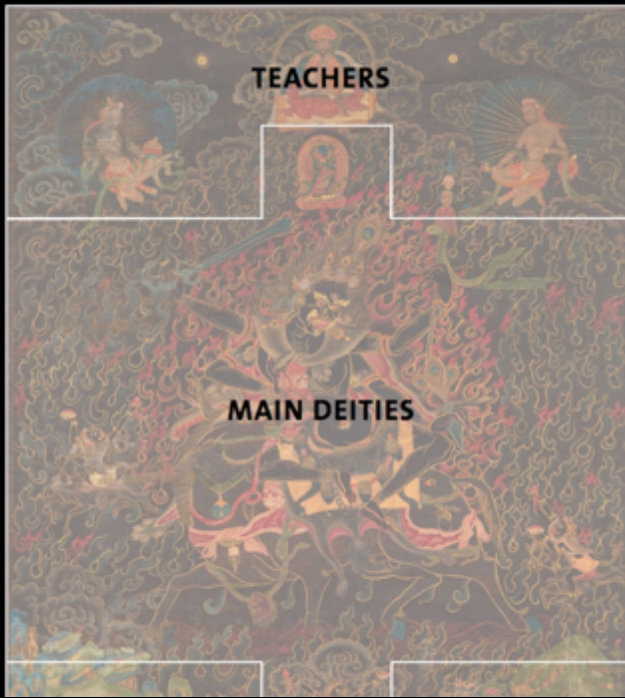
RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART

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EXPLORE COMPOSITION AND STRUCTURE: PALDEN LHAMO DUSOLMA

Three-Fold Division

The composition of this painting follows a three-fold division that is typical of Tibetan painting. At the top are the teachers, whose instruction is essential to the practice represented by the painting. In the center are the main deities to whom that practice is devoted. At the bottom are various protectors, wealth deities, and other figures within the Buddhist pantheon.

[CLICK A DETAIL TO EXPLORE](#)


Object Based Analysis

Click on the Teachers at the top and this page comes up with more information. Use the entire site.

ROBIN MUSEUM OF ART

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≡ BACK TO INTERACTIVES [LINKS](#) [START OVER](#)



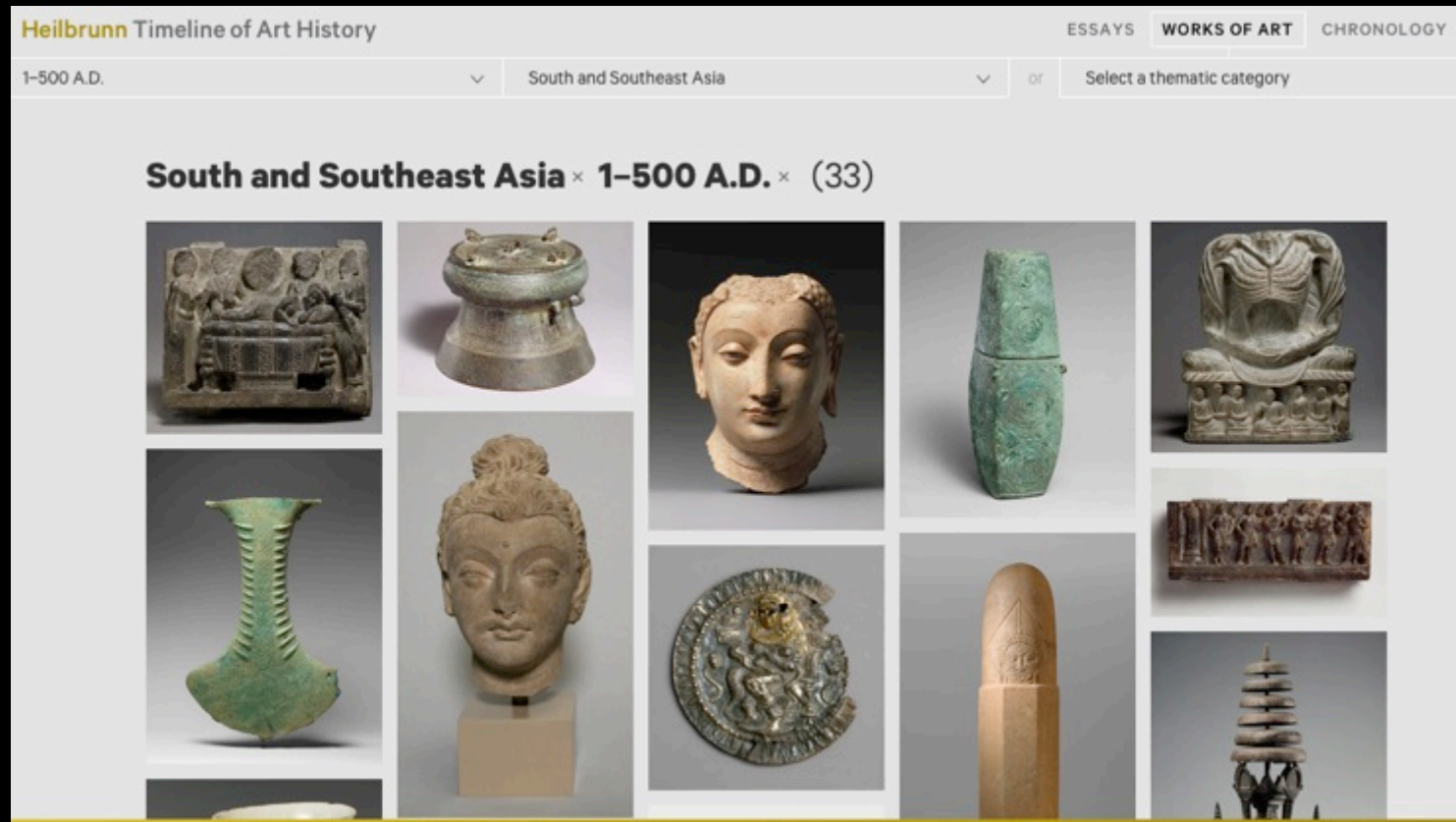
EXPLORE COMPOSITION AND STRUCTURE: PALDEN LHAMO DUSOLMA Teachers

Tibetan Buddhist practice is preserved through the passing of practice instructions from teacher to student, forming a teaching lineage that is crucial to the tradition. Thus the teachers within a particular lineage are typically presented at the top of Tibetan Buddhist paintings. Here the lineage includes a central teacher wearing Tibetan monastic dress and a hat typical of some Kagyu schools and the two main mahasiddhas of all Kagyu schools, Tilopa and Naropa.

CLICK A FIGURE FOR MORE INFORMATION

Heilbrunn Timeline-Met Museum


If you use the Met Museum site click on the image you want to do more research about. Pick an object related to Buddhism or Hinduism.



Object Based Analysis

I chose this image of the Seated Buddha. All information about Date, Culture, Medium, Dimensions are important.

Notice the other views to the left. Click on the image to enlarge. Also, notice the links to the right. This will give you more information.



PC
25
42
54

Seated Buddha

Date: 1st to mid-2nd century
Culture: Pakistan (ancient region of Gandhara)
Medium: Bronze with traces of gold leaf
Dimensions: H. 6 5/8 in. (16.8 cm); W. 4 1/2 in. (11.4 cm); D. 4 in. (10.2 cm)
Classification: Sculpture
Credit Line: Gift of Muneichi Nitta, 2003
Accession Number: 2003.593.1

Description


This small bronze Buddha is probably one of the earliest iconic representations of Shakyamuni from Gandhara. He sits in a yogic posture holding his right hand in abhaya mudra (a gesture of approachability); his unusual halo has serrations that indicate radiating light. His hairstyle, the form of his robes, and the treatment of the figure reflect stylistic contacts with the classical traditions of the West. This Buddha shows closer affinities to Roman sculpture than any other surviving Gandharan bronze.

[See additional object information >](#)

RELATED

- + ESSAYS
- + CHRONOLOGY
- + KEYWORDS

ADDITIONAL VIEWS (2)



Down at the very bottom notice this link: *See Additional Object Information.*

Object Based Analysis

If you click on the bottom link— [See Additional Object Information](#) —more information is presented as well as two audio links. Dig deep.

📍 On view at The Met Fifth Avenue in **Gallery 235**

This small bronze Buddha is probably one of the earliest iconic representations of Shakyamuni from Gandhara. He sits in a yogic posture holding his right hand in abhaya mudra (a gesture of approachability); his unusual halo has serrations that indicate radiating light. His hairstyle, the form of his robes, and the treatment of the figure reflect stylistic contacts with the classical traditions of the West. This Buddha shows closer affinities to Roman sculpture than any other surviving Gandharan bronze.

Audio

#7904: Seated Buddha, Part 1



00:00 / 01:39



#7904: Seated Buddha, Part 2

01:09

For Audio Guide tours and information, visit metmuseum.org/audioguide.

Review

This week I presented some introductory information about the subject of our class.

We will look at the images and ideas in more depth as we move through the semester.

I also talked about how to analyze images, including a little about visual literacy and object based research.

To help with your assignment this week, I also showed you the links and how to navigate the websites.



Next week we will talk about Creation Theories and how ideas about how the world and people were created, factors into belief systems, in particular Hindu and Buddhist.