The Buddha and the Gandharan Classical Tradition

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REPRESENTATIONS OF the historic Buddha Shakyamuni begin to appear in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD in the ancient region of Gandhara, a small basin in present north-west Pakistan (1). While related narrative and devotional images of the Buddha are known from several other parts of South Asia, notably the Kushan city of Mathura and in Andhra along the Krishna River, the largest body of early archaeological remains survives from Gandhara. Huge monasteries and sacred areas were built in the mountains that overlook this agriculturally rich basin bisected by the many tributaries of the Indus River (2). At these sites a great many reliefs narrating the Buddha's life embellished stupas, and thousands of devotional images of Buddha and Bodhisattvas stood along the edges of these sacred complexes.

The monastic centres benefitted from the sustained patronage of the multicultural community that took up residence in Gandhara because of its control over both the Khyber Pass through the Hindu Kush Mountains and the high Karakorum pass over the Himalayas. Goods flowing through these Silk Road arteries made the merchant class wealthy and, by extension, the monasteries they sponsored became important centres of learning. This commerce also facilitated artistic exchange with distant partners in China and the Mediterranean and, perhaps most significantly, with the important cities and Buddhist communities in the Kabul Basin, Bamiyan valley and the region of Bactria in Afghanistan, as well as with the oasis centres across Central Asia. Trade provided the economic foundation, while Buddhism served as the ideological framework that linked Gandhara with the Central Asian Silk Road and, ultimately, with China. For these reasons, the Gandharan conception of the Buddha came to stand at the centre of a truly global artistic tradition.

A perfect example is a beautifully carved image of the Buddha with its subtly rendered face, well-proportioned body and dramatic cascading drapery folds (3). His damaged right hand would have been raised in the abhaya mudra, a gesture of approachability typical of nearly all standing representations of the Buddha from Gandhara. Looking closely at the elongated figure it is immediately apparent that the sculptor was concerned with naturalistically representing the human form. Although frontal and formally presented, the Buddha tilts his head and stands with his right leg slightly bent, giving the figure a sense of contraposto. Today, we are drawn to images like this because of their naturalism and humanity, which must have been true for the original Gandharan audience as well. The idea of creating artworks that represent the human form realistically has always been compelling. As with the advent of photography, realistic representation of the human body
appealed to people across linguistic and cultural boundaries. In the ancient world, various artistic traditions explored these ideas, Greece and Rome being obvious examples, but it is also important to think of Gandhara as yet another place where representing the human form found a new and vital expression.

The Gandharan Buddha was part of an extended classical tradition that first reached Afghanistan and Pakistan with Alexander's invasion around 330 BC, and went on to become solidly established as the result of ongoing trade. In this light, formats of depiction developed by the Romans are especially significant, given the massive commercial exchange made possible with the advent of sea trade that linked the Mediterranean and South Asia, starting sometime around 50 AD.1 During the 1st to 3rd centuries, this trade also flourished because of the political stability that the Kushan dynasty brought to North India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Artworks with a classical artistic vocabulary travelled in the form of luxury goods along the Silk Road with culturally diverse merchants, who must have also appreciated this stylistic approach. These same merchants patronised the Buddhist monastic establishments of Gandhara, so it is not surprising that classical motifs and ideas, like naturalism, became so popular. Clouding any discussion of this topic is the fact that the colonial British, with their taste for all things neoclassical, sympathised with images like this Gandharan Buddha much more readily than the vast and complex pantheon of Hindu deities they encountered. I bring this up as it is all too easy to confuse a discussion of classicism and the Gandharan Buddha image with the 19th and early 20th century rhetoric of imperialism, as such images were employed as symbols to legitimise

Standing Buddha, Pakistan, ancient region of Gandhara, possibly from Takht-i-bahi monastery, 3rd century AD. Schist. Height 92.7 cm. Purchase, Denise and Andrew Saul Gift, in honour of Maxwell K. Hearn, 2014 (2014.188)
British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent. In this light, Gandhara was seen as a derivative tradition slavishly copying the art of the West. When one looks to the many studies that attempt to link Gandhara to Greek and Roman forms, they inevitably fail to produce clear results precisely because we are looking at two parallel traditions independently exploring how to present the human form. The common use of motifs certainly points to shared ideas, common sources and exchange, but the long and complex Gandharan artistic tradition is much more readily understood as an independent branch of a vast classical tradition.

On some of the earliest reliefs there are rare instances
role of being protective nature deities, the iconography of an aquatic boatman occurs only this one time, suggesting that these deities were borrowed and recontextualised to serve this South Asian role as protectors.

Looking at the vast corpus of Gandharan sculpture, such one-to-one borrowing is extremely limited. Instead, we see the vibrant workshops of Gandhara reworking and reinventing classical ideas to give iconicographic form to local Buddhist ideology. A good example is a 1st century AD garland bracket with a winged figure offering flowers (6). While we see motifs related to the classical tradition, like the acanthus leaves from which the figure emerges or the volute above her head, this sculpture is fundamentally different in conception from the stair riser. Here the linear treatment of her drapery and hair, as well as her jewellery, are paradigmatic of a workshop that we know to have been active in Taxila in the city of Sirkap and at the Dhararajjika stupa complex; a style that reflects a local rather than international taste. More to the point, the very idea of a celestial winged figure making offerings at a Buddhist stupa is something that comes out of North Indian Buddhist imagery, with similar figures known from sites like Mathura, Bharhut or Sanchi.

Coin finds and dated inscribed reliquaries indicate that many Gandharan sacred areas were founded between the 1st and the mid-3rd century AD, and some of the first structures to be donated to these newly founded Buddhist complexes were small relic stupas adorned with narrative imagery (7). In this panel, Maya, the Buddha’s mother, reaches up and grasps a tree branch, following a pattern seen with North Indian yakshi images, with the baby miraculously born from her right side (only the baby’s halo survives in this image). A panel like this one would have been part of a sequential set that encircled the drum of a stupa so that, as the devotee ritually circumambulated the monument, the actions of Shakyanuni’s meritorious life would unfold. A set of reliefs would tell the story of the Buddha’s birth, childhood, his leaving the palace, enlightenment, acts of conversion and, ultimately, his death and

when Gandharan motifs and iconography appear to have been taken directly from luxury objects moving with trade. A good example of this kind of direct exchange and recontextualisation is a circa 1st century AD group of marine deities holding oars (4) that would have been set into the front face of a stair ascending the base of a relic stupa. Note the pervasive classical references such as the Corinthian column or the figures’ powerful muscled bodies. Telling is how the figures gesture, interact and stand with a great sense of self-assurance and authority (5), unusual characteristics for Gandhara. Their stance and the anatomy of their chests almost certainly draw directly from a portable artwork that made its way to Gandhara through trade. This assertion is supported by Roman plaster casts of figures, originally done in silver, that were recovered in a cache of trade goods at the Afghan site of Begram. While the marine deities fit perfectly into the South Asian

the enshrinement of his relics. Devotionally important scenes, like the First Sermon, were placed in false gable frames on the fronts of these stupas or at the top of the dome on the four sides of the *karmika*, which framed and supported the crowning umbrellas. In a panel that would have adorned a *karmika*, the Buddha is shown reaching down to set the wheel of the law (the Buddhist *dharma*) into motion (8). The First Sermon is the moment when the Buddha reveals the path to enlightenment to his five initial disciples, here shown with shaved heads and wearing robes to show their status as monks. This narrative presentation of the First Sermon is clear and unambiguous; note the deer on his throne even marks the location at the deer park in Sarnath. While it is easy to understand this relief in the context of the Buddha’s life story, this depiction, with its centrally placed oversized Buddha, clearly also anticipates the emergence of large devotional images that rapidly come to populate the sacred areas. Although it is difficult to determine when this shift to large independent devotional images occurs, a 3rd century date is supported by numismatic evidence that broadly provides a means to date the sacred architecture.²⁹

Bust of the Bodhisattva Maitreya, Pakistan, ancient region of Gandhara, circa 4th–early 5th century. Schist. Height 76.2 cm. Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, 1942 (42.25.15)
Returning to our standing circa 3rd century Buddha (3), it is striking that the artist has omitted all narrative indicators—here, emphasis is given entirely to his enlightened presence. We do not fully understand how an early devotional image like this would have functioned, but I suspect it is strongly related to veneration of Buddha relics. Over time, the Gandharan sacred areas came to be filled with image shrines organised to aggrandise and surround the main relic stupa. At this time, devotional images were never placed in independent contexts—they are always in association with relic structures and it is only at the very end of the Gandharan tradition in the 5th century that devotional images begin to appear in monasteries. Given that the main stupa was the central devotional focus, I have argued elsewhere that perhaps the imagery served to give form to the Buddha’s enlightened presence.\textsuperscript{11} In any case, it is important to note that large numbers of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were placed in shrines along the edges of sacred areas to demark the enclosure, with no single image given an elevated status as the focus of devotion.

The masterful execution of this Buddha is the product of an elite workshop, with the closest comparable images coming from the central Gandharan Buddhist complex of Takht-i-bahi (2).\textsuperscript{12} One technical characteristic, pointing to a high-end workshop, is the dense fine-grained schist used for this image. While the sculptural production in Gandhara is massive, there appears to have been a relative shortage of the best quality stone. Workshops in Gandhara understood how to source and quarry schist, a metamorphic stone that often breaks irregularly along planes of weakness, and even the most humble of images will be done in stone free of obvious flaws. The dense schist in this image, in spite of the internal jointing that has led to the loss of the outside of the left arm and his right foot, allowed for various surface textures and finish. The face and feet have a fine polished surface suited to flesh, while his robe has a matte texture; this uniform stone also allowed the skillful artist to articulate his wavy hair using a flat chisel. Traces of dark lead red pigment survive on his robe, suggesting it was originally painted.\textsuperscript{13} The quality of this sculpture is perhaps most evident in the refined way the stylised drapery reveals and accentuates the sculptural volumes of the Buddha’s body. This subtle, yet powerful, treatment of the body gives this Gandharan Buddha great presence, transcending a format that, at times, can be stiff and wooden in the hands of less accomplished sculptors. One could also point to the way the artist has rendered the Buddha’s slightly tilted head and elegant facial features, which possess a degree of softness and naturalism not often seen in Gandhara.

While Gandharan imagery is known for its humanistic portrayal of the Buddha, in fact, this kind of approach was short lived. Largely, this is because the image of the Buddha was meant to convey the idea of enlightenment and a perfect state of meditation, and thus needed to be physically perfect in ways that transcend mundane human appearance. In practice, this led to representing the Buddha and Bodhisattvas in more abstract idealised ways that distance the figure from the corrupt mundane world. Take, for example, a great masterpiece in the Metropolitan Museum’s collection, a bust of the Bodhisattva Maitreya that was produced near the end of the Gandharan tradition in the 4th or early 5th century AD (9). The treatment of his face is much more stylised, as befits a living god residing in a heaven. His body is hard and precise, completely lacking the soft naturalism seen with the earlier Buddha, though the artist still takes care to show his rib cage and the muscles of his chest and stomach.

I believe this rejection of naturalism has much to do with the idealised Buddhist, Hindu and Jain imagery of North India that ultimately comes to be important in Gandhara. The North Indian Gupta idiom is especially apparent in the sculpture of Afghanistan. For example, compare two 5th to 6th century heads of the Buddha, one of which is probably from the Afghan site of Hadda (10) while the other is from the North Indian city of Mathura (11). They are remarkably similar, note especially the elongated shape of the eyes, the linear ridge of the eyebrow that defines the top of the nose and even the fleshy treatment of the cheeks and lips. The emergence of the Gupta stylistic vocabulary in the north-west makes its appearance because of the political unification of Afghanistan, northern Pakistan, Kashmir and north-central India under the Hephthalites, or Hunas, around 450 AD. Although Skanda Gupta pushed the Hunas out of North India, they were able to establish briefly a capital in Kashmir, and it is at this time that new artistic formats were introduced into the north-west of the subcontinent.

When thinking about the classical/Gupta traditions in Gandhara and Afghanistan, the situation is made more complex by the co-existence of multiple stylistically distinct regional workshops.\textsuperscript{14} As I noted at the beginning of this
article, the idea of naturalism, once introduced, seems to have been reimagined and reworked by artists over time. Take, for instance, a monumental Bodhisattva, which was likely produced at the site of Sahri Bahrol in central Gandhara (12). Given that it originally stood nearly 4 metres tall, it could only have been housed in a massive image shrine, suggesting it was sculpted near the end of the Gandharan tradition, sometime in the first half of the 5th century. Given that a great many earlier Buddha and Bodhisattva sculptures would have been standing in the Gandharan sacred areas, it is not surprising that this late figure reflects an awareness of the classical tradition. However, upon close inspection it is remarkable how different it is from the 3rd century Buddha discussed above (3). The image of the Buddha emphasized the volume of his body that moves under his robes. In contrast, the robes of the later Bodhisattva are stylized and hang formally over his body while, at the same time, great emphasis has been placed on realistically depicting his anatomy. Note especially the treatment of the chest and stomach, which are unlike the earlier images. His body is so naturalistic that one wonders if it was based on the direct observation of human anatomy rather than on earlier sculptural precedent. In any case, this Bodhisattva is certainly a very different conception of the human form than our circa 3rd century Buddha (3) or the late Maitreya (9).

In the last phase of the Buddhist tradition in Gandhara and Afghanistan, in the 6th and 7th centuries, portable metal images of the Buddha started to be produced (13). The face and hairstyle of one of these small images reflects an awareness of the Gupta typology, as can be seen here, while the robes relate to long-standing Gandharan precedents. Images like this one must have freely moved along the Silk Road and, in fact, several images coming out of these workshops today sit in the Tibetan collection of the Potala Palace in Lhasa. With the spread of Buddhism along the Silk Road to Central Asia and China, charismatic portable images were an important means for converting people to this new faith. These portable Gandharan Buddha figures must have had particular significance, as stylistically related imagery appears at the Central Asian oasis sites of Khotan, Miran, Turfan, and others. Take, for example a
Standing Maitreya Buddha from China dated to 486 AD (14), which although stylistically different from the Gandharan metal images, nonetheless shows many related characteristics. This is especially evident in the attention given to the elaborate drapery folds, the way the robes are treated at the feet and even the hairstyle, all of which indicate an awareness of the Gandharan idiom in spite of the fact that this sculpture was produced more than 2000 miles from Gandhara.

13 Standing Buddha, Pakistan or Afghanistan, 6th century. Brass. Height 33.7 cm. Purchase, Rogers, Fletcher, Pfeiffer and Harris Brisbane Dick Funds and Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1981 (1981.188a, b)

14 Maitreya Buddha, China, Shanxi province, Northern Wei dynasty (386–534), dated 486. Gilt leached bronze with traces of pigment, piece-mould cast. Height 140.3 cm. John Stewart Kennedy fund, 1926 (26.123)
