

Buddhist Art in Ancient Gandhara, an Appraisal of its Distinctive Features

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The present research paper focuses on the Buddhist art of Gandhara. The main objective behind this has been to focus on the distinctive features of this art. Gandhara art was initiated under the powerful Kushan kingdom and this was its blossoming period. Thus the term Gandhara art applies to the Buddhist art and architecture that flourished in Gandhara region from the 1st century to the 5th century A.D. After the Mahaprinirvana of the Buddha, his followers started to worship him but they did not have any object for worship like stupas and Buddha images. Firstly, King Asoka built thousands stupas and viharas and during this time Buddhism was spread in Gandhara by Majjhantika. Gandhara received its share from the relics of the Buddha, and they erected stupas to enshrine the relics of the Buddha and the story of Buddhist art and architecture also started with that. Maurya state followed the Graeco-Bactrians kingdom. The Indo Greeks rulers arrived with new philosophical and cultural approaches giving new dimensions to the art of Gandhara. Subsequently, the Indo-Scythian and the Indo-Parthian set new trends in the local traditions. However, the Kushan rule proved more innovation in the field of art and architecture. It is in this regard that reign of Kanishka-I is considered the golden age of Gandhara art. During the reign of Kanishka, Buddhism took a new twist and developed into Mahayana Buddhism (the Great Vehicle). Mahayana Buddhism gave birth to the most tangible form of Gandhara art. In India, initially Buddhist sculptures were made in the form of symbols but Emperor Kanishka gave physical shape to the Buddha statue and the first Buddha figure was constructed in Gandhara. This was the most important contribution of Gandhara art in the depiction of the Buddha in human form. The main purpose of Gandhara art is the spread of Buddhism through the different sculptures carved in stone, stucco, terracotta bronze and even paintings. Gandhara art is first and foremost a religious Buddhist art. The events of the life of the Buddha starting from his mother dreaming up to his great demise are captured in these art works. Besides the sculptures exemplify the life of the Buddha, single statue or relief of him, either standing or seated were also erected. Gandhara art

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Sculpture is divided into three groups: Independent cult images of the Buddha and Bodhisattva, Non-Buddhist deities' images, Relief panels.

Gandhara sculptures are entirely connected with Buddhist iconography, though many of them manifest some western or classical influence and this Buddhist art is generally known as Graeco-Roman, Greco -Buddhist, Indo-Greek and Indo-Bactrian and Roman-Buddhist. The images of the Buddha resembled precisely to 'Apollo' the Greek god of beauty .The describing style is sophisticated and has stylish manners. The Buddha images are shown in many different poses such as abhayamudra, dhyanamudra, dharamacharkamudra and bhumisparshamudra. The images of the Buddha show some special signs or symbols. The most prominent among those that appear are ushnisha, ur̥ṇā and wheel. The main focus of the art was Buddha's life stories and individual images, his previous birth stories or jatakas. Bodhisattvas and Buddha. The theme of Gandhara art was the depiction of different concepts of Buddhism. Many aspects of Gandhara art have been studied but however this art misted up in obscurity. Even today many questions remain about the date of its rise and decline; the sources of its influences and causes of its destruction. All these issues are part of discussion of the present research study.

Key words: Gandhara art, Asoka, Kanishka, Buddha, Bodhisattva, Buddhism, sculptures, Mahayana