

Gandhara Art: The Problem of Dating

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ABSTRACT

The sculptural style that was discovered in the north-western part of India, which on the modern map is a part of Afghanistan and Pakistan, was singularly unique and fundamentally different from the indigenous sculptural style of central and southern India. The difference was the western element in motifs, concept and technique. Since this style was centered around the region of Gandhara it has been so named. Attributing the source of this occidental element to be Graeco-Roman, the beginning of this art style is dated by some to the 1st. and 2nd. Centuries A.D. to coincide also with the vigorous Roman trade under the empire. This was identified as the first stage of this art style. The second stage was seen in the 2nd. And 3rd. centuries A.D. when much Indianized, it flourished in the reign of the Kusana Kings.

Most of Gandhara sculptures were Buddhist, consisting of the images of the Buddha, the Bodhisattva and the decorative sculpture upon temples, etc. The initial depiction of the Buddha is also crucial to the dating of the beginning of the Gandhara style for it took a change in Buddhism itself to represent in art the form of the Buddha. To argue for an early date for a western input into Buddhist iconography causes problems of dating with the central and southern Indian schools of sculpture.

To place the beginning of a Greek influence to a period after the dissolution of the Greek kingdom in Bactria which extended upto the Kabul valley as early as the 2nd. Century B.C. is also problematic. Thus while the Bactrian Greeks built Greek cities (Ai-Khanum) and Greek temples (at Jundial in Taxila, the ancient capital of Gandhara) and raised monuments to Vishnu (the Garuda pillar dedicated by Heliodorus, son of Dion) and discussed the philosophy of Buddhism (Milinda Panha - King Menander with the sage Nagasena) it is an improbability that they did not create works of sculpture, though few in number remain. Thus the source of the western tradition in the style of Gandhara can be said to be Hellenistic Greek which passed through Bactria, developed further under the Parthians and reinforced with the influx of Roman trade.