

## EARLY BUDDHIST ART: AN OVERVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

This article is a humble endeavour to provide an overview of the Early Buddhist Art. Buddhism has been one of the earliest religions in India to have inspired art. The purpose of art in Buddhism was to propagate the ideals of Buddhism. Beginning with the aniconic stage, we see an evolution in the art where comes the anthropomorphic representation of Buddha. Early form of Buddhist art has been divided into categories according to the dynasties that ruled during those times. Thus, the article looks into the characteristics of Buddhist art during Mauryan Empire, Kushana and Gupta Period.

**KEYWORDS:** Early Buddhist Art, Maurya, Kushana, Gupta Dynasty

### INTRODUCTION

Buddhism, it is believed to have developed around 484-404 BCE<sup>1</sup>. Buddhism took its name from 'the Buddha' or the Awakened or Enlightened One. Siddharth, the royal prince of Kapilvastu, a small kingdom in the Himalayan foothills, who had a divine birth, as predicted by the sages was to conquer the world either physically or mentally by spreading his wisdom. He, thus, renounced the luxuries of his royal lineage in search of the Truth and meditated underneath the Banyan tree where he got Enlightened, It is these principles of his Enlightenment that form the doctrine of Buddhism. The principles of Buddhism have also been propagated through the medium of art. Buddhist art, according to Radha Banerjee, means popularly those monuments and paintings which have for the main purpose the edification or popularization of Buddhism<sup>2</sup>. In this essay, we are going to trace the evolution of Buddhist art over a historical period. We are going to delve into the progression of Buddhist art through Mauryan, Kushana and Gupta period. However, the main focus would be on the first two dynasties.

### MAURYAN EMPIRE (ca. 323 – 185 BC)

The Mauryan empire could be aptly proclaimed as the first in ancient India to have unified the subcontinent politically. Chandragupta was the first emperor of the dynasty. However, it was his grandson Asoka, who was the most illustrious of the Mauryan kings. After having fought the Battle of Kalinga, Asoka took to Buddhism and thus started the Buddhist influences in art and architecture. Art of this era could be divided into two: Court art and Folk art. Court art comprised basically of the art and architecture patronized by the royal kings, which during Asoka's reign saw the erection of pillars with inscriptions of 'dhamma' on some of them. On the other hand, folk art was by the common people who propagated the Yakshas and Yakshinis, the local deities worshipped for their fulfilling powers, through art.

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey, Peter (ed), *Buddhism*, Continuum, New York, 2001, p 4

<sup>2</sup> <http://ignca.nic.in/budh0002.htm#Gupta>

- **Pillars**

Asokan pillars are mentioned in Buddhist literature of later periods.<sup>3</sup> These pillars had been installed in various cities of his empire. A pillar consists of two distinct divisions. The long, monolithic shaft that was the heaviest and difficult to erect had a stone capital above it. The stone capital comprises of an inverted lotus, an abacus and a crowning sculpture, usually an animal. These pillars are free standing pillars that are plain and smooth. They are generally made up of buff-grey Chunar sandstone. The average height of the pillars could be somewhere between 30 to 40 feet. Another characteristic of the pillar is that the surface is well polished. The examples of these pillars are : Lion capital at Vaishali, Bull capital at Rampurva, Bihar and Lion capital at Sarnath, UP. The Lion capital at Sarnath, apparently *in situ*, was seen by the Chinese traveler, Hsuan-tsang and he described it as “bright as jade...glistening and (sparkling) like light<sup>4</sup>.”

The lion capital at Sarnath is one of the greatest artistic accomplishments of ancient India. The well polished shaft has Asoka’s inscription that appeals to the Buddhist monastic community (samgha) for unity. The capital at Sarnath is particularly interesting to notice. It has an inverted lotus, the intermediary abacus that is well adorned and has four chakras and four animals namely, the bull, horse, lion and elephant. This is surmounted by four lions facing four directions. The chakras are placed right beneath the feet of the four lions which symbolizes probably the wheel of the law or the ‘dharmchakra’. The lion symbolizes not only the royalty that alludes to Asoka himself but Buddha has been often called a ‘lion’ thus giving it another reference. The Lion capital has been adopted as the emblem of India thus perpetuating the concept of the ‘Wheel of Law’.

- **Stupa Art**

Stupa art makes up an important part of Buddhist art. The stupa is ‘a type of reliquary mound, and is a form of caitya. Originally, the term caitya denoted either a mound of earth or a sacred tree, generally enclosed within a wooden railing, which designated the spot where there had been a funeral pyre and consecration<sup>5</sup>.’

According to some Buddhist texts, Sakyamuni Buddha’s relics were divided into eight parts and this was distributed to various kingdoms that erected stupas over them. The important sites that have seen the erection of stupas are Bharhut, Sanchi, Amravati and Jaggapeta. The first two stupas belong to the period of aniconic art where the presence of Buddha is only suggested through various symbols linked to him rather than establishing his idol. The symbols have been taken from the life events of Buddha like the ‘peepal tree’ under which Buddha got enlightened.

The stupa at Bharhut was built in 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. In the absence of the stupa itself, it is speculated that the structure would be similar to that of its contemporary like the one at Sanchi. The Bharhut sculptures abound with the representations of the birth stories of Gautama Buddha. These stories fall broadly into two categories. The first set of stories are taken from the previous births of Buddha as a Bodhisattva and the second ones are those of his last appearance as the Enlightened Being or having attained Buddhahood<sup>6</sup>. The Jatakas represented on the Bharhut panels include Mahakapi Jataka, Miga Jataka, Mahajanaka Jataka, Vidhurapandita Jataka etc. The Bodhi tree has also found a prominent place in the Bharhut panels emphasizing its importance in Buddhism. Buddhists also incorporated the folk art i.e. the Yakshas and the Yakshinis. They assimilated them in the Buddhist art but only to give them an inferior status. These

<sup>3</sup> Huntington, Susan, *The Art of Ancient India*, Weather Hill, NY, Tokyo, 1993, p 44

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p 47

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p 61

<sup>6</sup> <http://ignca.nic.in/budh0002.htm#Bharhut>

Yakshinis would always have a 'vaahan' or a vehicle, generally an animal to stand on. There were distinct poses in which they were sculpted, for instance, the shaal bhanjika pose, was one of the most common poses.

Another example of the aniconic art phase of Buddhism is manifested in the stupa at Sanchi. It was built between 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. and 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. The construction of this stupa was started by Asoka. There are four gateways in four cardinal directions. Each gateway has two square pillars with capitals on top. These capitals support the superstructure of architraves. The pillars and the architraves are decorated with representations of Jataka tales. The Eastern gateway's middle architrave (front view) represents the Mahabhinishkraman or The Great Departure. Since Buddha's presence is suggested, we can see a riderless horse which has a parasol above. Similarly, on the Northern gateway's lower architrave, Vessantara Jataka is represented.

### **KUSHANA PERIOD (1<sup>st</sup> -3<sup>rd</sup> CENTURY AD)**

Kushana dynasty was a small tribe from North West border of China who were driven out of their land. They came to Bactria in modern day Afghanistan about 135 B.C. Kanishka was one of the rulers of this dynasty. Under them developed two capitals of art; Gandhara near Peshawar and Mathura. The Kushana period is also important because the Buddhist art saw a transition from aniconic to iconic art. Since then the Buddha figures were made and his representation was no more left to symbolisms.

- **Gandhara School**

Gandhara School has its own distinct style of Buddha images that have undergone a certain influence from the Greek images of Apollo. The Gandhara Buddha is generally made up of grey coloured sandstone. It has a sharp chiseled nose, lips and half closed eyes that are reminiscent of the Hellenistic influence. The drapery covering the body of Buddha is heavy which reflects also the weather conditions of the Gandhara region. The halo of Buddha is not beautified whereas the Ushnisha, cranial protuberance, is quite heavy in earlier period of this school. Mahapariniravana of Buddha was first depicted by the Gandhara artists.

- **Mathura School**

Mathura school was the contemporary of Gandhara school. As there were influences of Greek gods in the Gandhara style, Mathura saw more of indigenous influences like that of Bhagwatism. The early images of Buddha from Mathura depict a tall, burly with powerful body image. This could be seen as the influence of the images of Yakshas who were sculpted as all powerful and strong. The Mathura Buddha was sculpted of red sandstone unlike the Gandhara Buddha. The early stages of Mathura school sees a Buddha with a plain scalloped halo, a small ushnisha and a clean shaven head. With a smile on his face, he has a robe that covers one of his shoulders. All this gives way to the later images of Buddha, where the halo gets decorated, garment covers both the shoulders and appears to be lighter. Standing images of were more popular in Mathura.

### **GUPTA PERIOD**

Gupta period is considered to be the Golden Age of India. The Guptas had extended their territory to vast expanse of the country. They prided themselves in eradicating foreign rule under the Kushanas. Chandragupta was the first Gupta ruler followed by others. Gupta period incorporates sensuousness and spirituality in their art. Buddhist art under Guptas had two main centres namely Mathura and Sarnath. Mathura had already witnessed a lot of Buddhist art before the rule of

Guptas. In the Buddha images from this era, the proportion of the body is well balanced, there is no halo, the lips are fuller and the drapery becomes diaphanous. However, in later stages, we see a fully developed halo that has a vegetal motif or a lotus motif.

There are three basic differences between the two main centres in the representation of Buddha. Firstly, Buddha's robe in Sarnath has no folds in it. Secondly, at Sarnath, the halo is invariably plain without any lotus motifs and thirdly, the body of the Buddha appears to be slender. Besides Buddhist art, Gupta period experiences with flourish the development of Hindu art as well.

## CONCLUSIONS

Buddhism has been the first of religions in India to have inspired art. Beginning with the aniconic stage, we see an evolution in the art where comes the anthropomorphic representation of Buddha. The earlier period of Buddhist art saw the establishment of pillars with Buddha's inscriptions mainly during the Mauryan rule. The stupas form also one of the most integral parts of Buddhist art as it plays with symbolisms. Furthermore, with the coming of Kushanas, there is a transition from symbolisms to actual representations of Buddha. Gandhara and Mathura schools flourish under the Kushana reign, while later on, during the Gupta period, Mathura and Sarnath emerge to be the centres of Buddhist art. Each centre has its own characteristic feature inherent in the region as well as the external influences, thus making Buddhist art a widely dynamic form.

## REFERENCES

1. Harvey, Peter (2001), *Buddhism*, New York, Continuum
2. Huntington, Susan (1993), *The Art of Ancient India*, NY, Tokyo, Weather Hill
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4. <http://ignca.nic.in/budh0002.htm#Bharhut>