



Buddhist Art and Architecture

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Early Buddhist art

The earliest Indian religion to inspire major artistic monuments was Buddhism, the first creed to enjoy the patronage of a thriving community, express a clear ideology, and boast an efficient monastic organization. Buddhist monuments were great human endeavours inspired by faith and creative imagination. By the first millennium BCE, Vedic society in the Punjab was breaking up, as the population pushed east along the course of the Ganges, clearing forests and settling on the fertile land. Cities emerged as centres of trade and commerce, populated by prosperous merchants who were served by artisan guilds living close to urban centres. Money, as a form of exchange, and writing gradually made their appearance in this society.¹ The political map of India was changing, pastoral communities giving way to early states called *mahajanapadas* as tribal republics fell before ambitious monarchs competing for control over North India. The situation was aptly described in the epic *Mahabharata* as one 'where big fishes ate little fishes'. The state of Magadha in the north-east, controlling the river trade, forests, and rich deposits of minerals, ultimately emerged as the nucleus of the first Indian empire.²

Asoka and the empire of compassion

The emperor Asoka (c.269–232 BCE) was the first major patron of Buddhist art. He succeeded his grandfather, Candragupta Maurya (322–297 BCE), who had brought the whole of North India under his control by overthrowing the unpopular Nanda dynasty. He created the cosmopolitan Mauryan empire, which was run by an efficient centralized bureaucracy. Asoka, who inherited the vast empire, made a dramatic conversion to Buddhism which led to an experiment unique in human history. Shocked at the carnage attending his conquest of Kalinga (present-day Orissa), Asoka became a Buddhist and a pacifist, admonishing his subjects to practise compassion and ethical behaviour. The code of behaviour (*dharma*) propounded by him also showed political astuteness in inculcating social responsibility in a heterogeneous empire where tensions between urban merchants and Brahmin orthodoxy threatened stability.³ Asoka, who inscribed his

Detail of 6

Glossary of Buddhist artistic and architectural terms

anda—ovum or egg, the hemisphere of the stupa
ayaka—decorated five-pillared projection at Amaravati
Bodhisattva—the ‘Buddha to be’, containing his essential characteristics
caitya—apsidal prayer hall
citra—picture or painting
dana—giving unreservedly to others as a form of religious merit
gavaksa—arched or horseshoe-shaped window in a *caitya*
hinayana—the ‘doctrine of the Lesser Vehicle’, a term used by Mahayanists for their opponents who venerate the Buddha
jataka—the stories of Buddha’s previous human and animal lives
mahayana—the ‘doctrine of the Greater Vehicle’, which holds the Bodhisattva as greater than the Buddha
mudra—language of hand gestures in art and dance conveying meaning and mood (also Hindu)

naga—mythical many-hooded king cobra
parinirvana (nirvana)—end of cycles of suffering through the end of consciousness, symbolising the Buddha’s demise
pipal—tree under which the Buddha attained illumination
pradaksina—ritual circumambulation of a sacred structure or image in a clockwise direction (also practised by the Hindus)
sangha—monastic order
stupa—memorial to the Buddha, shaped like the mound of earth containing his ashes
tirtha—holy pilgrim site associated with relics
torana—arched gateway
triratna—the three Buddhist jewels: the Buddha, the Doctrine, and the Order
vihara—a retreat for nuns and monks
yaksa/yaksi—male and female nature spirits with supernatural attributes in folklore

message on rock faces and stone pillars in public places throughout his empire, comes across as refreshingly human.

Mauryan artisan guilds, mentioned in literature, were engaged in Asoka’s projects. The high polish of Asokan pillars, lotus bell capitals, and stylized lions [2] had suggested to scholars, such as Vincent Smith in 1930, that Iranian journeyman carvers came to Asoka’s cosmopolitan empire in search of work after the fall of the Achaemenids. From this evidence Smith confidently ascribed Perso-Hellenistic origins to Indian art.⁴ In 1973, John Irwin challenged this ‘colonial’ hypothesis.⁵ He suggested firstly that not all ‘Asokan pillars’ belong to Asoka’s reign: he might have simply adapted many of the existing pillars for his own imperial ends. Secondly, while the four lions are influenced by Persian art, bulls and elephants are treated with a lively observation that is unmistakably Indian. Again, the honeysuckle and acanthus motif, which at first sight seems adopted from Western classicism, was no more Greek than Indian. It belonged to the ancient west Asian artistic pool that nourished both ancient Greece and India. Finally, Irwin maintained that in order to discover the true origins of these pillars, it is more useful to look beyond their style to their function. In short, rather than initiating monumental art in India, Asoka made imaginative political use of a much older pillar cult symbolizing the

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Asokan lion pillar, Sarnath, third century BCE.

The emblem of the present Indian Republic—its four roaring lions, facing the four cardinal directions, proclaim the might of Buddhism. The lions symbolize the Buddha as *cakravartin*, the emperor of the spirit. This is possibly the earliest surviving example of Indian sculpture, but the prominent wheel of the Buddhist Doctrine, which originally surmounted the lions, has disappeared. The representation of animals reminds us of the respect with which Buddhism treated them.



axis mundi (the pillar as the symbolic representation of the axis on which the world spins).

Buddhist patronage and the monastic order

Asoka’s astute marriage of politics and religion, as expressed in art, was an exception. In early Buddhism, which established close links between monasteries and the laity, communal patronage vied with royal patronage. In India, royal support of religious monuments is a rather complex issue. One reason may be that royal or Ksatriya claims to divinity were held in check by the competing claims of the Brahmins. Art historians have tended to use royal dynasties as convenient stylistic labels, since hard evidence for constructing a reliable chronology for Indian art has been scarce. While dynastic labelling rightly makes a virtue out of necessity, we should be careful not to confuse a monument’s mention of a royal era with active patronage by that dynasty. Often such mentions are no more than royal

recognition of all the faiths within the kingdom.⁶ Indeed, as we shall see, tensions arose where kings used royal temples as a form of political legitimization when the temples themselves belonged to communities rather than to monarchs. These tensions are reflected in the fact that sometimes members of a royal family were very active patrons although the ruler himself was not. Sacred buildings or images were often endowed in India by individuals to gain religious merit, and these included kings in their personal capacity as devotees.

Buddhism, the first Indian religion to require large communal spaces, inspired three major types of architecture: the stupa, the *vihara*, and the *caitya*. Between the first century BCE and the first century CE, major Buddhist projects were undertaken with subscriptions raised from the whole community. Generous donations were made by landowners, merchants, high officials, common artisans, and, above all, monks and nuns, many of them belonging to emerging social groups in search of an identity. It is remarkable that women from all walks of life, including courtesans, were drawn to Buddha's teaching. Did women and the lower *varnas* play a more active role in Buddhism because they were debarred from Brahmanic rituals?

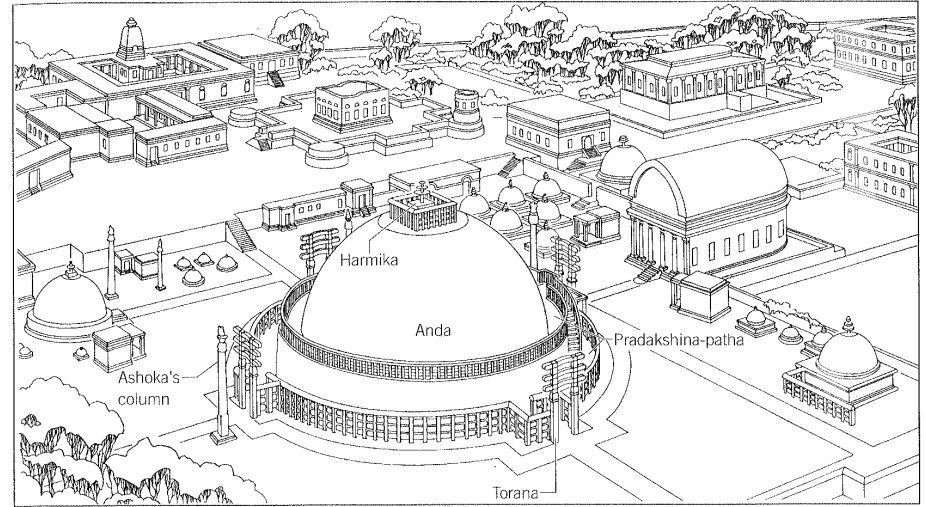
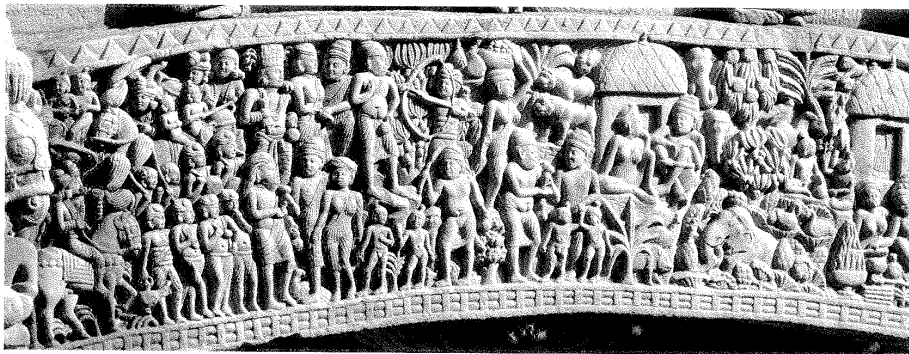
The Great Stupa at Sanchi

The early stupas, which preserved the Buddha's relics, were the first monuments to symbolize the power and magnificence of the faith. Originally the focus of a popular cult of the dead, the stupa celebrates the Buddha's *parinirvana*, the central message of Buddhism, and also symbolizes his eternal 'body'. Unlike the early stupa at Bharhut and Stupa II at Sanchi, the Great Stupa at Sanchi has survived intact, offering us first-hand knowledge of the aims and achievements of early Buddhist architecture. Situated on a major trade route near the city of Vidisa (Madhya Pradesh), Sanchi came to be a great sacred site and was visited by Asoka, who is commemorated on the East Gate of the

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Vessantara Jataka (story of Prince Vessantara), bottom architrave, front and back, north gate, the Great Stupa, Sanchi, first century BCE/CE.

The prince, who is the Buddha in his previous life, gives away all his material possessions, including the white elephant, auspicious emblem of the kingdom. Banished by his enraged subjects to the forest, he loses his family there. Eventually virtue is rewarded and everything is restored to him. Its prominent representation at Sanchi reminded the laity of the importance of giving to the Order.



4

Reconstruction of Sanchi. In the foreground is the Great Stupa, first century BCE/CE.

The Great Stupa is replete with cosmological symbolism, as well as being the central symbol of Buddha's *parinirvana*. The svastika-shaped ground plan, with four gateways facing the cardinal directions, is the spatial image of the *dharma cakra pravartana* (setting the wheel of the Doctrine in motion), the supreme principle of Buddhism. Visiting pilgrims performed circumambulation, tracing clockwise the path of the sun, which reminded them of the Buddha's dazzling spiritual power. The earth-filled dome represents the seed of life, *anda*. The three parasols shade the reliquary from the sun, the enclosing railing further protecting its sanctity. A shaft symbolizing the world axis penetrates the dome, fixing the stupa firmly on the ground. Other cosmological details include the 120 uprights of the monolithic balustrade representing the 12 signs of the zodiac.

Great Stupa. By the first century CE, the Great Stupa had been enclosed in brick and stone slabs, plastered over, and possibly painted white and its ornamental gateways were completed.⁸

Around a thousand small donors, including some 200 women (among them the nun Buddhapalita), funded this remarkable stupa, its scale and artistic richness bearing witness to the organizational efficiency and considerable resources of the monastic order.⁹ However, the cost of the decoration of the gateways was borne by 11 major donors. Generosity (*dana*) was raised to the level of a sacrament in Buddhism, instilled through the popular story of Prince Vessantara [3].¹⁰ Among the donors at Sanchi were the ivory workers from the nearby town of Vidisa who carved the details of the gateways as an act of piety. But the overwhelming evidence is that in ancient India architects (called *sutradhara*, literally builder-carpenter), masons, stoneworkers, and sculptors were professionals who undertook religious projects regardless of their own religion, a phenomenon seen throughout Indian history. If ancient Indian art and architecture were expressions of profound faith, this was mainly the faith of the patron, not necessarily of the craftsman.

The stupa's crowning glory is the set of four sandstone gateways, their festive sculptures providing a dramatic foil to the unadorned hemisphere [4]. The sculptures remind us of wood or ivory carving, as in the Indian ivory statuette found in the Roman town of Pompeii, which was buried in lava in 79 CE. In each gateway of the stupa, three uprights and architraves, with coiled ends resembling the unfurling of scrolls, rest on thick rectangular pillars. *Triratna* motifs, the three Buddhist jewels—Buddha, the Doctrine, and the Order—are placed

Yaksi (nature spirit), the Great Stupa, Sanchi, first century BCE/CE.

The nubile tree nymph, a support for the architrave, is often represented lovingly wrapping her leg around a tree to make it bloom. A Buddhist folk deity, her deep-set navel, rounded breasts, narrow waist, and 'full-moon' face anticipate the Indian canon of beauty. The links between women, fertility, and auspiciousness are well attested in literature.



at the pinnacle of the gateways (*toranas*). The most significant decorations are the central narrative panels, surrounded with a host of human, animal, geometric, and plant motifs, among them the earliest female nudes—the schema embodying a hierarchy of meaning implicit in Indian sacred decoration [5]. Especially sensitive are the renderings of water buffaloes and elephants that mingle in a magic world with human-headed lions and many-hooded king cobras (*nagas*), reiterating the Buddhist belief in the unity of life. The Sanchi artists revel in forest scenes and towns with buildings containing balconies, vaulted roofs, and moats, offering us a wealth of information about contemporary life not found before.¹¹



Buddha's victory over Mara's forces, his final tempters before illumination, the Great Stupa, Sanchi, first century BCE/CE.

The artists show off their versatility in caricature here in portraying the demons sent by Mara to frighten the Buddha. As opposed to the canon of beauty seen in 5 and 52, these demons with bulging eyes, snub noses, and protruding teeth epitomize the 'ugly'—thus negatively reinforcing the aesthetic canon.

Visual stories: the Sanchi reliefs

If the actual construction of the stupa was left to professionals, the narrative programme shows a unifying vision that was almost certainly provided by the monastic order, the guardians of the Buddhist canon. The pilgrims were introduced to the basic tenets of their religion represented on the front and the rear of the gateways, the sculptures providing spiritual lessons in an age of limited literacy. Around 60 major themes chosen from the Buddhist canon can be reduced to two types: *jatakas*, the stories of the former animal and human lives of the Buddha, paradigms of the Buddhist pilgrim's progress towards an enlightened state, and the life of the historical Gautama who attained Buddhahood [6].

It is curious that at Sanchi and other early monuments the historical Buddha was never represented as a human being. As the French orientalist Alfred Foucher argued in 1911, early artists used a specific symbol to suggest each 'station' in Buddha's spiritual journey, the *pipal* tree standing for his Enlightenment, the wheel for his First Sermon, and the stupa for his final *parinirvana*. Yet Buddha images became a commonplace by the second century CE. This change from the 'aniconic' to the 'iconic' phase in Buddhist art has been one of the most contentious issues in Indian art history (see box). The late appearance of the Buddha image has been variously explained on stylistic and doctrinal grounds, firstly by Foucher. Recent research has discovered early literary references to Buddha images, thus fuelling a new controversy, led by Susan Huntington.¹²

The Sanchi reliefs offer us the first narrative devices employed in ancient Indian art [3]. On the three central panels of each gateway an

The Buddha image controversy

Susan Huntington rejects the French orientalist Alfred Foucher's hypothesis of 1911 that the first Buddha images were 'aniconic', or not represented in human form, since Buddha images are mentioned in the earliest Buddhist literature. Hence the stupa, the wheel, and the *pipal* tree in early stupas were not symbolic depictions of Buddha's life but simply of relics worshipped at pilgrim sites. Vidya Dehejia, who disagrees, holds that emblems such as the stupa are not mere relics. Because of their capacity for multiple reference, they serve to remind the viewer of the stages in Buddha's life as well as the sites where these events took place. While Huntington convinces us that a number of instances of the *pipal* tree, the wheel, or the stupa at Sanchi represent relic worship, the following scenes strongly suggest biographical episodes: the divine impregnation of Maya, Gautama's mother; Gautama's departure from home (depicted at Sanchi by 'the riderless horse', but the Great Stupa at Amaravati shows both an early relief with the riderless horse and a later one with the Buddha on horseback); and the Buddha walking on the waters of the river Nairanjana. It would indeed be curious if early Buddhists worshipped the Buddha's relics but not himself, whose personal charisma had moved thousands. Nonetheless, the absence of the Buddha image at Sanchi remains a baffling mystery.

essentially 'pictorial' technique was adopted, for instance the suggestion of recession by placing distant figures above and behind the foreground ones. These panels anticipate the preference of Indian sculptors for relief carving, rather than making free-standing figures. Even fully rounded figures, such as the *yaksis* at Sanchi, are meant to be seen as 'three-dimensional' only from the front or from behind, but appear flat if they are seen from the side. The relief form gave artists an opportunity to create large narrative scenes full of movement and an overarching rhythm, the sculptural groups forming part of the monumental stonework. The sense of movement in Indian art, very different from the static notion of perfection in classical Greek and Roman art, is often lost in a museum, where Indian sculptures are displayed as isolated fragments divorced from their contexts.

Any artistic representation must resolve the problem of time. The well-known mode in art history, deriving from Greek sculpture, is the representation of the significant moment, in which a dramatic action is 'frozen'. At Sanchi, several narrative conventions were adopted. The story could be told either in a sequence within a single frame or in a continuous narrative. The famous *Vessantara Jataka* uses a continuous narrative that flows from the front through to the back. Another technique is a 'repetitive' device suggesting progression, seen in the *Battle for the Relics of The Buddha* (south gate, back, middle architrave), one of the most dramatic scenes at Sanchi. The central panel depicts the impending battle with chariots, elephants, and foot soldiers in readiness, the town serving as a backdrop. The tumult is captured by subordinating the individual figures to an overall rhythm; next to it is the scene of kings exchanging relics amicably among themselves. Vidya Dehejia identifies the *Monkey Jataka* at Sanchi as a further, 'synoptic'

mode: multiple episodes, presented within a frame, are held together by a single central representation of the main character in the plot.¹³

Buddhist monasteries

One of the three jewels of Buddhism, the Buddhist monastic order, which was organized on a large scale, required commensurate living quarters. From the time of the Enlightened One, the order and the lay followers developed a relationship of mutual dependence. Monks and nuns, shunning worldly possessions, survived on the generosity of the laity. They repaid this by offering religious lessons to the faithful, who gained merit through materially supporting the order. Monasteries were founded as centres of Buddhist learning near prosperous towns and on sites hallowed by association with the Buddha. They grew into vast establishments, as at Sirkap in Gandhara or at Nalanda in Bihar. By 100 BCE, *viharas* and *caityas*, hewn out of the living rock, began competing with constructed ones, partly on account of their durability.

Between 120 BCE and 400 CE, over a thousand *viharas* and *caityas* were built in the Buddhist monastic complexes along ancient trade routes in the Western Ghat mountains. These sites evolved from the haphazard placing of buildings to their systematic planning.¹⁴ The *vihara* was a dwelling of one or two storeys, fronted by a pillared veranda. The monks' or nuns' cells were arranged around a central meeting hall, each cell containing a stone bed and pillow and a niche for a lamp. In contrast to such austerity, *caityas*, or halls for congregational worship, were second in splendour only to stupas. Merchants and members of the monastic order endowed the *caityas* generously, though small donations soon dried up in favour of fewer, larger endowments.¹⁵ The focus of veneration within the *caitya* was a replica stupa, placed at the end of the prayer hall. Later, at Ajanta for instance, a Buddha image embellished the front of the stupa. Circumambulation, hitherto performed in the open air at stupas, was incorporated into the U-shaped plan of the *caitya*: two rows of pillars separated the narrow corridors on either side of the main hall, thus creating a path which continued behind the replica stupa.

As with much ancient Indian art and architecture, most of the *caityas* cannot be firmly dated and thus pose problems for the study of their evolution. In an attempt at a solution, the pioneering historian James Fergusson applied the concept of evolution from the simple to the complex to these monuments. However, Fergusson's own classical taste led him also to conclude that the earlier and simpler the architecture, the better it was. Fergusson's chronology, which is still in use, seriously distorts our understanding of Indian architecture. But if we take early Buddhist architecture as technically, if not 'aesthetically', simple, we can then trace evolution in terms of greater complexity and sophistication, as builders became more experienced. (However, the

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Caitya, Bhaja, c.100–70 BCE.

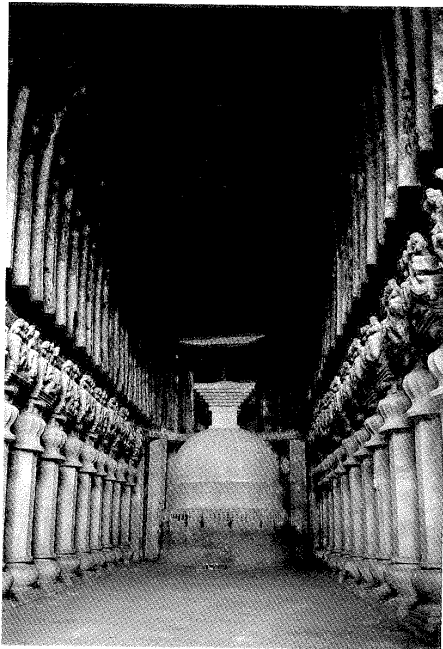
The open façade, which allows a full view of the interior, is as yet without the distinctive stone window (*gavaksa*). In the interior, the pillars are plain octagons having neither a base nor a capital, all of which indicate its rudimentary character. The imitation of wooden beams and other elements in stone suggests the human tendency to retain forms that have lost their function, a phenomenon best described as 'the persistence of memory'.



8

Interior of *caitya*, Karle, c.50–70 CE.

A handsome stupa rises at the curved end of a spacious hall. Rows of robust pillars with capitals that support couples riding on animals on either side separate the main hall from the low ambulatory corridor. The slight gap between the pillars and the 46-foot-high curved ceiling reinforces the impression of the lofty vault of heaven. However, the grandeur of the interior is created less by size or height than by the proportions of the architectural parts, a distinct feature of Indian architecture.



persistence of wooden elements in rock-cut *caityas*, which seem to hark back to the past, creates its own difficulties.)⁶

A comparison of an early example from Bhaja with one of the most ambitious ones at Karle highlights the significant features of the fully formed style [7, 8]. In successive sites new elements were added and forms refined. The dimensions increased, while pillar capitals were richly embellished with figures as the bases emulated auspicious water-filled vases. Karle (c.50–70 CE), built with subscriptions from Buddhists from different walks of life, and measuring 124 feet by 45 feet, was the summit of *caitya* architecture, not because it was the latest but because it was the most elegant. A massive four-lion pillar at the entrance proclaims the majesty of the Doctrine. The crowning feature of the façade, set in a recess carved out of the surrounding rocks, is an elegant horseshoe-shaped *gavaksa* window derived from secular wooden buildings, which bathes the interior in a mellow light. The height of the ceiling is only 46 feet; the grandeur of the interior is created less by size or height than by the careful proportions of the architectural parts, a distinct feature of Indian architecture.⁷

Later Buddhist art

Buddhist icons

The representation of the human form of the Buddha, one of the most enigmatic developments in Buddhism, changed the course of narrative art in India. When European archaeologists found the first classically inspired Buddha images at Gandhara in north-western India in the 1830s, they associated them with the Indo-Greeks who ruled the region in the first century BCE. The discovery led Foucher to conclude that the Buddha image was invented by the Greeks, thus prompting an artistic revolution in India. His conclusion followed from his argument that at Sanchi and other early sites the Buddha was represented symbolically. This assertion was challenged in 1926 by the nationalist art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, who cited a different set of Buddha images produced in the same period at Mathura. As he showed, these were inspired by the indigenous *yaksa* cult that owed little to western classical art. However, modern research has overtaken such purely stylistical explanations of the Buddha image, although the date of its origin continues to be hotly debated.⁸

To follow the implications of the latest research, we need to examine the history of the period. After the break-up of Asoka's empire in the second century BCE, regional dynasties came to prominence, while the different centres of Buddhism gained in importance, notably Gandhara in the north-west. Since the time of the Persian conquest Gandhara's fortunes had been interlocked with those of Bactria (the region between present-day Afghanistan and

Tadzhikistan), a cosmopolitan area populated by Persians, Greeks, Scythians, and Parthians. After the fall of the Mauryas, Alexander's successors ruled Gandhara for a while. The Indo-Greek king Menander (140–110 BCE) was almost certainly a Buddhist, as suggested by the famous *Discourses of Menander*.

Hellenistic art followed Alexander's footsteps from Asia Minor through Iran to central Asia, reaching Gandhara under the Indo-Greek rulers. Not only were classical orders deployed in the buildings of Taxila, the capital of Gandhara, but examples of the minor arts of the classical world—stone palettes, gold coins, jewellery, engraved gems, glass goblets, and figurines—poured into the region in the wake of Roman trade. The region imported Chinese lacquer and South Indian ivory with equal enthusiasm. Furthermore, the ivory figure from Pompeii shows that trade also flowed westwards.¹⁹ The Roman historian Pliny the Elder complained bitterly of Rome's being drained of gold because of an unfavourable balance of trade with India.

In the first century CE, the region came under the sway of the Kushan empire. The far-flung territory of Kanishka (c.78–101 CE), covering an area from Mathura in north-central India through Gandhara-Bactria up to the borders of China, helped to disseminate Buddhism. Kanishka, its greatest champion since Asoka, became renowned as the patron of the Buddhist intellectual Asvaghosha. Kanishka convened the fourth Buddhist Council at Kashmir and was associated with one of the largest stupas in Afghanistan.²⁰

Kanishka's reputation as a Buddhist and his trade with Rome led scholars to believe that Gandhara Buddhas originated in the Kushan empire and were of Roman inspiration. Although some revisionist scholars now believe that Hellenistic Gandhara Buddhas were the first to be created, as early as the first century BCE, it was only in Kanishka's empire in the first century CE that one finds large numbers of Buddha icons [9]. During Kanishka's reign, an alternative Buddhist tradition arose at Mathura, a great religious centre. One of the earliest Buddha images found here was that dedicated by the monk Bala [10]. Gandhara and Mathura Buddhas, hitherto regarded as culturally inimical to one another, appeared within the same empire.

If both Gandhara and Mathura Buddha images were created in the Kushan empire, how then can we explain the shift from the aniconic to the iconic phase? Some scholars see the appearance of the Buddha icon in the doctrinal changes that followed the rise of Mahayana Buddhism (the doctrine of the Greater Vehicle) during Kanishka's reign. The reverence for the Buddha as having shown the way to salvation was rejected by the Mahayanists in favour of the Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be), who postponed his own *nirvana* for the sake of suffering humanity. There are, however, objections to the hypothesis that this doctrine of the saviour figure gave rise to the Buddha icon. The Buddha was

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Bodhisattva Maitreya, Gandhara, second century CE.

Bodhisattva ('the Buddha to be') is represented with elaborate coiffure, moustache, and personal jewellery, worthy of a prince. But his attributes—*ushnisha* (literally turban, the topknot of an ascetic's hair), *urna* (the spot on his forehead), and elongated ears—show him to be superhuman. The Greek sun god Apollo provided the model for Bodhisattva, who appeared like the young sun come down to earth, according to the Buddhist philosopher Asvaghosha. As a great teacher, the Buddha also dons the Greek philosopher's *palliatum* (robe).



worshipped almost from his lifetime. Furthermore, Bala, mentioned above, was a Hinayana monk, a sect hitherto believed to be hostile to image worship. Even more interesting is the fact that the majority of early monks and nuns were sponsors of images.²¹ However, the fact remains that Buddha images became ubiquitous only during Kanishka's rule, when Mahayana had transformed the Buddha ideal. Also, the spread of devotionalism (Bhakti) in around the first century CE, with its emphasis on personal salvation, must have encouraged the use of icons. Finally, the concept of divine kingship prevalent among the Kushans may have encouraged the image of the Bodhisattva as a princely figure.²²

The Kushan sculptors established clear iconographic conventions for the Buddha and the Bodhisattva and for their *mudras* (language of hand gestures), one of the central ones being the *dharmacakra*

Standing Buddha dedicated by the monk Bala, Mathura, c.100 CE.

The great teacher in Mathura art is draped in a transparent monk's attire with his right shoulder bare, offering reassurance with his right hand (now missing), while the left hand rests on his hip. The energy of these heroic, over life-size Buddhas derives from the indigenous *yaksa* figures such as the one discovered at Parkham in Uttar Pradesh.



pravartana (the first sermon, symbolized by the turning of the wheel of the Law). Gandhara also initiated a new narrative mode, employing 'the frozen moment' of western art that relied on anatomical accuracy, spatial depth, and foreshortening. A rather striking use of western anatomy is to be found in the representation of the skeletal Buddha, whose emaciation was the outcome of his asceticism before his illumination. One must remember, however, that Gandhara made only selective use of western illusionism, melding Hellenistic, Roman, Indian, and Parthian elements.²³ As opposed to Gandharan illusionism, Mathura developed an alternative 'shorthand' narrative mode for depicting Buddha's life.²⁴

The Great Stupa at Amaravati (reconstruction), second century CE.

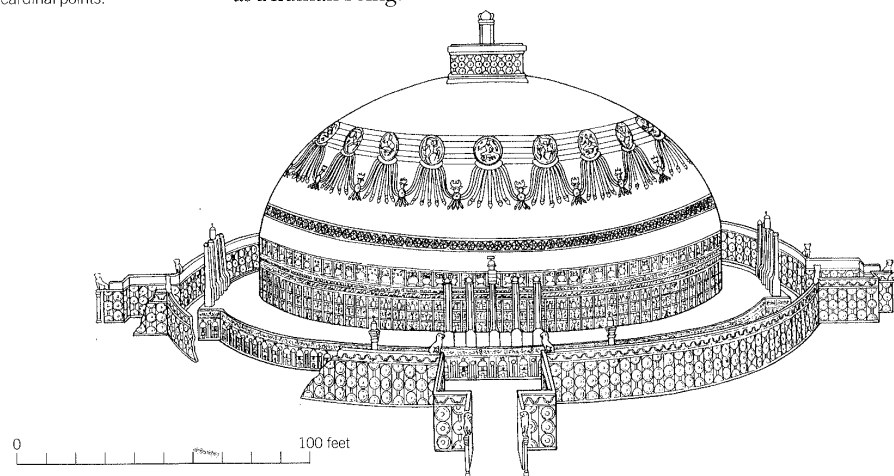
The face of the drum of the monument and the projecting *ayaka* platform on the west side can be seen through the cutaway section of railing. The decoration of the upper dome is speculative and is based upon contemporary renditions from the drum slabs.

The solid hemisphere, estimated to have been 60 feet in height, was raised on a cylindrical platform 6 feet high and 140 feet in diameter. The stupa was protected by a three-part outer railing, 192 feet in diameter, consisting of 136 lofty pillars and 348 robust crossbars that held up 800 feet of coping stone decorated with flowing garlands borne aloft by humans and animals. Two pairs of lions guarded a 26-foot-wide gateway at each cardinal point. The narrow ambulatory was placed between the outer railing and the drum, with profusely decorated *ayakas* at the cardinal points.

The Great Stupa at Amaravati

While Buddha images were being fashioned in North India, the Great Stupa at Amaravati, founded in the Asokan period, was reaching its culminating phase. Amaravati was situated near the capital of the kingdom of Satavahana (in present-day Andhra Pradesh), whose prosperity was based on overseas trade, especially with Rome. The stupa owed its final splendour to the Mahayana monks, wealthy merchants, and a Satavahana queen.²⁵ Rediscovered by British officials in the nineteenth century on the eve of its demolition, today it survives only in fragments. A happy accident, however, enables us to marvel at the stupa even now. The surviving panels show different versions of the monument, offering a glimpse of what the stupa may have looked like. This 'self-imaging' process has always been an integral part of Indian architecture (see chapter 3). Even though we can never gain a totally accurate picture of the stupa, which evolved over a long period of time, we can at least form a clear impression of its basic design.

Its most noticeable difference from the Great Stupa at Sanchi is in the use of limestone sculptural reliefs to cover the entire dome, creating a shimmering, marble-like effect [11]. We can retrace the pilgrims' path as they entered the stupa through one of the gateways, after gazing in admiration at the roundels of the outer railing decorated with lotus motifs. Once inside the gate, the pilgrims read the sacred tales of Buddhism on the inner face of the railing as well as on the drum during their circumambulation [12] Amaravati contains both early narratives without the human Buddha and those with his human form in the final stages of the stupa, allowing us to observe clearly the transition to the new mode. The drum allowed the creation of long narrative friezes, such as that depicting the Great Departure, now showing the Buddha as a human being.



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Mandhata Jataka, inner face of outer railing, the Great Stupa, Amaravati, second century CE.

The treatment of musicians and dancers demonstrates a new complexity in the deployment of figures and composition. Amaravati reliefs exude energy, their composition held together by a flowing narrative, realized through softly modelled figures. At Sanchi we only glimpse the sense of movement that is so characteristic of Indian sculpture, but that here is achieved with greater virtuosity, as expressive possibilities expanded.



The Gupta court

The period of the Gupta court (c.320–467 CE) is generally regarded as the pinnacle of ancient Indian civilization. Founded by Candragupta I in 320 CE in Bihar, the empire reached its zenith in the reign of Samudragupta (c.335–76). The so-called Allahabad inscription details the emperor's conquest of North India and his humiliation of the southern rulers. Some of his gold coins, which portray him as a musician, offer us a glimpse of his personal taste. The Chinese pilgrim Faxian, who visited the empire in c.405 CE, was impressed by the Pax Gupta: its stable regime, light taxes, and general sense of well-being.²⁶

The Gupta court in the fifth century was adorned by the legendary 'nine gems', including the astronomer and mathematician Aryabhata, who was the first human known to have calculated the solar year accurately, and Kalidasa, ancient India's greatest poet and playwright. Another contemporary, Vatsyayana, who composed the *Kama Sutra* for the young man about town (*nagaraka*), attests to the urbane way of life in the Gupta empire. A treatise on sexual pleasure, the *Kama Sutra* considers sex as only one aspect, though an essential aspect, of gracious living. Vatsyayana advises that the well-appointed leisure chamber for the cultivated should include not only musical instruments but also 'a painting board and box of colours'.²⁷ Even more interesting is Yasodharman's commentary on Vatsyayana, the *Sadanga* (*Six Limbs of Painting*), dealing with proportion, expression, representation, colour, and other aspects of the art. A contemporary reference to Gupta images as being 'made beautiful by the science of *citra*' suggests the

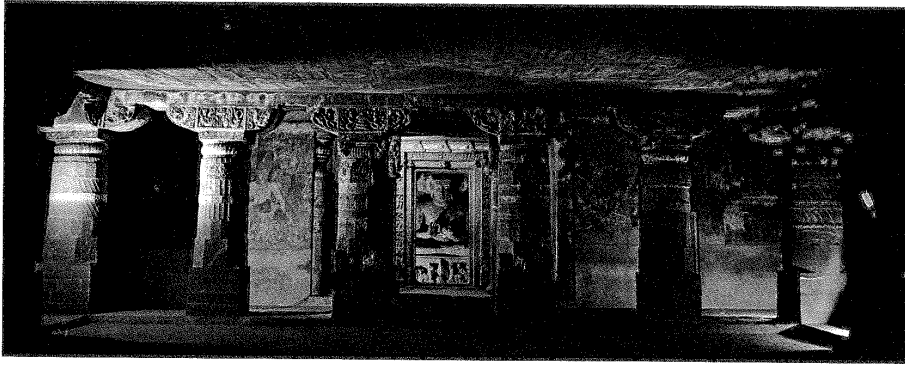
existence of aesthetic manuals.²⁸ Drama and lyrical poetry, written in courtly Sanskrit, reached unprecedented heights. Indian ideas of beauty, especially of female beauty, received their canonical expression in literature and subsequently influenced the visual arts. Ambitious stupas, *viharas*, and *caityas* continued to be raised all over India and beyond, as a complex network of Buddhist patronage stretched from

13

Seated Buddha, fifth century CE.

During the Gupta period the Buddha icon became a synthesis of Gandhara and Mathura styles. It is easily recognizable by its perfect oval face, serene smile, dreamy lotus eyes, elongated ears, close-cropped ascetic's hair, slim body, clinging light robe, and elegantly carved halo. The sculptors paid close attention to the fingers (important for the language of gestures or *mudra*), which were rendered with great delicacy. Monks and nuns were in the forefront of those who commissioned Buddha icons for the spiritual benefit of their friends and relations.





14
Cave I, Ajanta, interior, fifth century CE.

The lavish square central hall where monks probably socialized is dominated by the sculpture of a meditative Buddha set in a shrine against the back wall. The other walls are embellished with the Buddhist narrative cycle, including two paintings of the princely Bodhisattva of arresting nobility, their themes of kingship suggesting links with the reign of Harisena.

15
Bodhisattva Padmapani, Cave I, Ajanta, fifth century CE.

Ajanta painters used chiaroscuro and foreshortening, creating uniform natural light with tonal browns and yellows. Light yellow and white are used to highlight faces, figures, and architectural details and to create 'sheens' on surfaces. These techniques, together with Greek decorative borders, have led some scholars to suggest links with western classical illusionism.

Asia Minor to China along the well-trodden Silk Route, nourished by a thriving international trade [13].

The Ajanta cave paintings

In the rock-cut monasteries at Ajanta in the Deccan, narrative painting had been developing over centuries, its most intense and final flowering occurring in the reign of Harisena of the Vakataka dynasty (c.460–77 CE). His officials and vassals and Buddhist monks commissioned 20 of the finest Mahayana Buddhist caves. After the collapse of the Vakataka kingdom following Harisena's death, the caves were abandoned until they were rediscovered by the British in the nineteenth century. Literary evidence on Indian painting exists from the ancient period. In addition to the *Sadanga*, one notable work is the sixth-century iconographic text *Visnudharmottaram*, which gives details of landscape and other genres of painting. Fragmentary paintings have also survived at many sites including Ellora, Bagh, Badami, and later southern monuments. But only at Ajanta has enough evidence survived to give us an idea of the scope of ancient Indian painting.²⁹ The walls of the *viharas* were utilized for large-scale paintings that were harmonized with surrounding polychrome sculptures and ceiling decorations [14, 15].

The artists at Ajanta revel in action, drama, and human emotions. The *jatakas* and the Buddha's life, hitherto realized only in sculpture, are now invested with a new freshness and wealth of detail. One notices the evolution of narrative art from Sanchi to Ajanta, its growing complexity and its deeper exploration of human emotions (as, for example, in the moving story of Nanda's renunciation in Cave XVI), as well as its lively engagement with contemporary subjects and natural phenomena. Cave XVII is one of the most spectacular. The artists paint a storm at sea and a shipwreck in their treatment of the romantic tale *Simhala Avadana*. They also paint a panoramic battle scene, the only one known from ancient India.³⁰ At Ajanta, even though whole walls are taken as the

painting surface, the painters prefer to develop a series of illusionistic episodes within self-contained areas, each unit presenting a 'frozen' moment. Finally, in the light of such ambitious and carefully planned frescoes, it would be interesting to learn more about artists' workshops and guilds at Ajanta. Varahamihira, for instance, the author of *Brhatsambhita*, a compendium of various subjects including art and architecture, tells us that in social rank artists were placed with lowly musicians and dancing girls.³¹ But apart from a general knowledge of ancient Indian guilds we know disappointingly little.

