

Stylistic Development in the Buddha sculptures from kushan to Gupta Period: Select Sculptures from National Museum, New Delhi

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Introduction

Indian art, particularly its sculptural heritage, has honored the *Buddha* in a multitude of forms that demonstrate not only artistic skill but also profound philosophical understanding and spiritual devotion. *Buddha's* representation in sculptures has evolved over time, reflecting deep lessons and cultural shifts from the tranquil sculptures of the Gupta period to the colorful depictions in later medieval and contemporary art. These sculptures date back to the ancient Gandharan period. The Gandharan period (1st–3rd century CE) marks the earliest known depictions of Buddha in Indian art, combining Indian creative sensibilities with Hellenistic influences. The Graeco-Roman style of these sculptures, which reflected the blending of cultures along the Silk Road, featured idealized figures with realistic drapery folds and facial features, often portraying Buddha.

The representation of *Buddha* in Indian art is primarily based on symbolically rich iconography. Buddha in the '*Dhyana mudra*'¹ with eyes downcast and a calm countenance symbolizes introspection and inner serenity. The '*Bhumisparsha Mudra*'², represents the moment of *Buddha's* enlightenment when he called upon the Earth to bear witness to his awakening. *Buddha's* life and teachings are conveyed through many gestures and postures, each imbued with multiple layers of meaning.

Representation of *Buddha* in Kushan Period³

Buddha's depiction in Indian art saw tremendous advancements throughout the Kushan era (1st to 3rd century CE), fusing Persian, Indian, and Hellenistic creative elements to produce a unique style that is both regal and profoundly spiritual. During this period, which was marked by the Gandharan art movement's blossoming, some of the most famous sculptures of *Buddha* were created.

The Central Asian-born Kushan emperors brought with them a Greek and Persian-influenced cultural environment. The way that the *Buddha* is portrayed during this time clearly shows this

¹ Meditation gesture

² The earth- touching gesture

³ The permission from National Museum for the pictures is pending, therefore in the published version of this paper only the pictures details are included for reference.

influence. *Buddha's* depiction frequently has a more naturalistic aesthetic, with facial features and well-defined muscles evoking Greco-Roman sculptures. This illustrates the syncretic character of Gandharan art, in which Buddhist imagery was modified to fit regional aesthetic preferences and creative styles. Greek images of gods and rulers are the source of inspiration for the standing position of *Buddha* found in most Kushan period statues. This position denotes power and the presence of God. *Buddha's* features, which represent wisdom and enlightenment, frequently have a calm demeanor, with gently curled hair and lengthened earlobes. These sculptures' elaborately carved draperies display a mastery of stone cutting techniques that aimed to imitate the movement and flow of fabric.

Representation of *Buddha* in Gupta Period

The "Golden Age" of Indian art and culture, the Gupta era (4th to 6th century CE), is recognized for its notable contributions to philosophy, literature, building, sculpture, and other fields. *Buddha* sculptures from this era symbolize the pinnacle of creative brilliance, spiritual depth, and a resurgence of traditional Indian aesthetics.

Gupta-era *Buddha* sculptures are distinguished by their calm and idealized depictions, which highlight transcendental wisdom and spiritual elegance. The ancient "*Dhyanamudra*" or "*Abhayamudra*"⁴ are frequently used to illustrate the figures, signifying calmness, compassion, and fearlessness. Gupta era *Buddha* statues are characterized by their realistic style, rounded forms, and soft facial expressions that reveal a profound comprehension of human anatomy and emotional nuance. The sculptures portray a sense of inner serenity and heavenly presence by striking a beautiful balance between idealism and realism. Generally, an *uṣṇīṣa*⁵ symbolizes the spiritual wisdom of the Buddha, lengthened earlobes signify his royal ancestry and detachment from earthly riches, and a *ūrṇā*⁶ mark represents his third eye of insight. *Buddha's* robes are beautifully embroidered with minute details and arranged in graceful folds that accentuate his grace and fluidity of movement.

Buddha Sculpture: A Study of Iconography and Stylistic Evolution from Kushan to Gupta Period

Buddha sculpture from the Kushan era had a strong Greco-Roman influence from the blending of Indian Buddhist iconography with Greek artistic traditions. Realistic qualities, such as clearly defined muscles, expressions on their faces, and kinds of draperies folded, were portrayed in *Buddha* statues. The sculpture of the standing *Buddha* gained popularity. It was frequently shown in frontal stance, one hand uplifted in the *varada mudra*⁷ and the other grasping the hem of his robe. On the other hand, idealized shapes and a more sophisticated aesthetic sense became prevalent throughout the Gupta era. Sculptures of the *Buddha* from this era showed him with soft, rounded features, inner peace, and spiritual elegance. The focus was on using peaceful expressions

⁴ Hand gesture of assurance and protection

⁵ A topknot on the head

⁶ A mark between the eyebrows

⁷ Hand gesture of generosity

and harmonic proportions to evoke a sense of heavenly presence and wisdom.

Kushan period *Buddha* sculpture highlighted *mudrās*, or symbolic gestures, such as the *varada mudra* and *abhaya mudra*. Extended earlobes, which stand for wisdom, the *uṣṇīṣa*, which denotes spiritual insight, and calm facial expressions, which represent enlightenment and tranquillity, are examples of iconographic details. *Buddha* sculptures from the Gupta era had a higher focus on naturalistic details, such as nuanced facial expressions, finely carved robes with complex folds, and proportions of the body that are anatomically accurate. The *Buddha's uṣṇīṣa*, became increasingly noticeable, signifying his increased spiritual development and wisdom.

*Fig 1. Standing Buddha,
Accession No 49.24,
2nd Century,
Kushan Period, Gandhara,
Schist, National Museum, New Delhi*

The Standing *Buddha* sculpture, accession number 49.24, is a noteworthy example of the syncretic art style that flourished in ancient India under the influence of Greek and Indian cultural exchanges. It dates to the 2nd century CE and originates from the Kushan period in the Gandhara region. *Buddha* is depicted standing, a characteristic pose in Gandharan art influenced by Hellenistic traditions. His expression is calm, conveying inner serenity and spiritual tranquility associated with enlightenment. Despite its idealized nature, the sculpture captures compassion and genuine emotion in his features.

Realistic anatomical elements, such as delicately carved muscles and finely draped garments that accentuate rather than conceal the figure, highlight the craftsmanship. The intricately carved folds and patterns of the garments reveal meticulous attention to detail, typical of Gandharan sculptures. *Buddha's* elongated earlobes, symbolizing his noble lineage and renunciation of worldly possessions, are prominently depicted. The *uṣṇīṣa*, a cranial protuberance representing *Buddha's* elevated spiritual insight and enlightenment, is also visible.

The sculpture's right hand, likely in the *Abhaya Mudra* gesture symbolizing protection, bravery, and reassurance to his followers, is damaged. His left hand holds the robe of his clothing. *Buddha* is depicted standing on a full bloomed lotus pedestal. Additionally, two figures are carved in the *Anjali mudra* gesture of reverence on the pedestal.

*Fig 2. Buddha,
Accession No 87.1153,
2nd Century, Gandhara,
Schist, National Museum, New Delhi*

The sculpture of *Buddha*, identified by dates back to the 2nd century and originates from the Gandhara region, known for its distinctive fusion of Hellenistic and Indian artistic styles. This particular sculpture, crafted from stone, is currently housed in the National Museum in New Delhi. In this sculpture, *Buddha* is depicted standing on a narrow pedestal flanked by Corinthian pillars, with two figures shown worshipping *Buddha's* bowl. The sculpture also features *Buddha's* right hand broken, likely in the *Abhaya Mudra* gesture of reassurance and protection, while his left hand

holds the robe of his clothing.

The facial characteristics of *Buddha* in this sculpture reflect a blend of Indian and Gandharan aesthetics. His expression conveys introspection and inner serenity through downcast eyes. The hairstyle includes tight curls of the *uṣṇīṣa*, a prominent protuberance on top of the head symbolizing spiritual wisdom, with wavy lines radiating from the forehead to the *uṣṇīṣa*. The eyebrows are subtly defined, and the *ūrṇā* mark on the forehead is depicted in relief. The upper part of the plain halo is damaged. Similar to the previous sculpture, *Buddha* is adorned in an *ubhayānsika saṅghāṭi* robe, with two layers of draperies prominently displayed. The sculpture portrays *Buddha* with a serene smile, though his physique appears youthful.

Representing the artistic and spiritual values of the Kushan period in India, the Standing *Buddha* sculpture at the National Museum in New Delhi epitomizes *Buddha's* teachings with its calm expression and symbolic gestures. It marks a pivotal moment in the evolution of Buddhist iconography, showcasing the enduring influence of Gandharan art within the broader context of global cultural heritage. This sculpture serves as a historical artifact shedding light on ancient India's artistic prowess and religious customs.

*Fig 3. Buddha,
Accession No 49.21/1,
2nd – 3rd Century A.D, Gandhara,
Schist, National Museum, New Delhi*

The Kushan rulers, whose vast empire extended from India to Central Asia, had two capitals: Mathura in India and Gandhara in the northwest frontier of Pakistan. Both capitals were significant centers of art where depictions of *Buddha* in human form flourished. This sculpture of *Buddha* is damaged, with the lower part of the body and right hand missing. However, it belongs to the second to third century period, showcasing some stylistic developments. For instance, the *uṣṇīṣa* is depicted using rhythmic lines rather than small decorations, and the halo is no longer plain but adorned with geometrical patterns on its outer part (*ābhamandala*⁸).

The robes worn by *Buddha* are portrayed with flowing lines and intricate folds, reflecting the cultural and stylistic influences of the region and the time period in which the sculpture was created. The drapery accentuates the body's contours, adding grace and elegance to the figure. Additionally, *Buddha* is no longer depicted with a muscular body, marking a stylistic evolution in sculpture during this era.

*Fig 4. Seated Buddha,
Accession No 58.12,
Early 4th Century A.D, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh
Stone, National Museum, New Delhi*

This small and exquisite, and remarkably untouched sculpture depicts the Buddha sitting cross-

⁸ Aura behind the head

legged in the *dhyān mudrā* over a lion throne. He is clothed in an *ubhayansik sanghati*⁹ that covers both shoulders, creating a rib effect with schematic folds on the right side. The hair is styled in spiral curls with a protrusion on top of the head. An *ūrṇā* is visible on the forehead between the eye brows. The nimbus is richly decorated, featuring a fully blossoming lotus in the middle, surrounded by a floral wreath sprinkled with rosettes, a beaded border, and a scalloped edge. The throne, furnished with a cushion made of *kusā* grass, is held up by two lions with projecting tongues. A *dharmachakra* atop a pillar in the center, surrounded on all sides by male and female worshippers, fills the space between these two lions beneath the throne. The name of the reigning king is not mentioned in the one-line inscription located on the pedestal's lower rim.

During the Kushan period, *Buddha* was often depicted in a powerful form in sculptures, whereas in the sculptures of the Gupta period, his body was portrayed with a more spiritual essence rather than a powerful one. Additionally, during the Kushan period, the halo (*ābhamandal*) surrounding *Buddha* was typically depicted in a simple manner. However, in this sculpture and other examples from later periods, various intricate patterns and decorations have been added to the halo.

Furthermore, in contrast to the Kushan period where the *uṣṇīṣa* of *Buddha* was often depicted in a large size, in this sculpture and others from subsequent periods, it is carved in a smaller, more subtle form. This stylistic evolution in the portrayal of *Buddha* in sculptures highlights the artistic developments over time.

*Fig 5. Seated Buddha,
Accession No 59-527-3,
Late Gupta Period, 5th Century C.E, Sarnath
Stone, National Museum, New Delhi*

This single-piece carving depicts a standing *Buddha* with a *prābhavali* enveloping his entire body. He is shown in *abhaya mudrā* with his right hand, while his left hand holds the robe of his clothing. He bears *trivali* (*Mahāpurusha lakshana*, three lines on his neck) and elongated earlobes. His hair is tied in a top knot (*uṣṇīṣa*) and styled in small spiral curls.

The attributes of radiant inner serenity and tranquility, outcomes of ultimate wisdom, are embodied in this *Buddha* sculpture. The *Buddha* is adorned in the plain, unembellished garments of a monk, and his spiritual significance is further accentuated by a substantial halo and auspicious symbols both natural and supernatural, symbolizing Buddhahood—the ultimate stage of enlightenment. This sculpture served as a prototype for *Buddha* sculptures throughout Asia, representing the pinnacle of artistic advancement during a period of Buddhist expansion. During the Kushan period, the *ubhayānsika saṅghāṭi* worn by *Buddha* was carved with many folds, whereas in the sculptures of the Gupta period, the *saṅghāṭi* was depicted clinging closely to the body. Additionally, in the Kushan period, the halo (aura) surrounding *Buddha* was portrayed as very small. However, in this statue and others from later periods, the halo is depicted covering the entire body.

Thus, based on these statues from the Kushan period to the Gupta period, it is evident that there was a stylistic evolution in the portrayal of *Buddha* in sculptures.

⁹ Drapery covered by his both the shoulders

Conclusion

These sculptures, developed throughout numerous *Buddha* stages, have been exceptionally well crafted. These works of art reveal some of the same and distinct characteristics since they belong to multiple state eras. In this study, these sculptures established during numerous *Buddha*-related periods will be examined and analyzed in all aspects. In order to understand the aesthetic and iconographic development of *Buddha*, it is essential to examine how *Buddha's* image and symbolism evolved throughout different periods of art and culture. Buddhism admires *Buddha* as an important deity, and numerous artistic movements, cultural contexts, philosophical convictions, and innovations in technology have collectively had an impact on the manner in which he is represented.

In conclusion, the evolution of *Buddha* statues' stylistic elements from the Kushan to the Gupta eras shows a shift from realism and syncretism influenced by Hellenistic ideas to idealization, naturalism, and spiritual expression during the Gupta era. During these crucial junctures in Indian history, these modifications not only demonstrate the development of Indian art but also the strengthening of philosophical and spiritual values within Buddhist imagery.

Overall, the stylistic development of *Buddha* sculptures from the Kushan to Gupta period illustrates a transition from a more regal and monumental portrayal to a nuanced and spiritually profound representation. This evolution reflects changes in artistic techniques, cultural influences, and philosophical interpretations of Buddhist teachings during these pivotal periods in Indian history.

References

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