

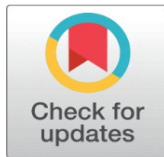


FROM APOLLO TO BUDDHA: TRANSFORMATION OF CLASSICAL IDEALS IN EARLY INDIAN SCULPTURE

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ABSTRACT

'Greek Art did not simply travel East; it was transformed in the process'.

-John Boardman

'The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity'

With the invasion of Alexander in 326 BCE, India witnessed an entirely novel set of culture, traditions, art and artistic expressions. He entered into the country through the passes of Hindukush into the region historically known as Gandhar and Punjab (present day Pakistan and Northwest India). Through his wars and conquests, Alexander formed an empire whose western boundary constituted regions west of Indus which was already a part of his Achaemenid conquests. On eastern front, he reached till Beas (Hyphasis) river and planned to invade the powerful Nanda Empire of Magadh. But he had to turned back due to his troops' mutiny. Moving towards south, he sailed down the Indus River to the Arabian Sea and left a garrison in Sindh and Punjab. Despite his desire to do so, he did not penetrate into the Gangetic plains or Central India. Even after his death, Greek presence continued in India till 1st century CE, with the cultural influences lasting much longer.

Keywords: Classical Ideals, Indian Sculpture, Transformation

1. INTRODUCTION

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With the invasion of Alexander in 326 BCE, India witnessed an entirely novel set of culture, traditions, art and artistic expressions. He entered into the country through the passes of Hindukush into the region historically known as Gandhar and Punjab (present day Pakistan and Northwest India). Through his wars and conquests, Alexander formed an empire whose western boundary constituted regions west of Indus which was already a part of his Achaemenid conquests. On eastern front, he reached till Beas (Hyphasis) river and planned to invade the powerful Nanda Empire of Magadh. But he

had to turned back due to his troops' mutiny. Moving towards south, he sailed down the Indus River to the Arabian Sea and left a garrison in Sindh and Punjab. Despite his desire to do so, he did not penetrate into the Gangetic plains or Central India. Even after his death, Greek presence continued in India till 1st century CE, with the cultural influences lasting much longer.

All this while, India and the florescence of its culture continued at its own pace. Other than Vedic culture, Buddhism and Jainism flourished and with these came the art and its expressions at various levels and in varied forms. Gautam Buddha and his life-cycle were the major themes of sculpture in North and North-Western India. The development of figural Buddha images in the early centuries of the common era constitute the most significant issue in art history. In the early phase of Buddhist art, especially at sites such as Bharhut and Sanchi, the presence of Buddha was highlighted through symbols such as Bodhi tree, empty throne, footprints of Gautam Buddha, or 'Dharmachakra' (Wheel of Religion) etc. But beginning at around 1st century C.E, sculptures of Buddha in Gandhar and Mathura produced fully the anthropomorphic images. Instead of symbols, Buddha now appeared in body form. He and the events of His life were boldly engraved in physical form. And the Gandharan examples in particular, exhibited striking resemblance of Gautam Buddha with classical Greek and Roman sculpture - so much so that early scholars described them as 'Apollo like'.

This paper is an attempt to explore how the Classical ideals brought forth in India through Greeks, transformed the entire language and expressions of Indian sculpture. It meta morphed into an entirely novel style of sculpture where the themes were Indian but stylistic features and visual language were Greek. Among others, the predominant Indian theme was the life and times of Gautam Buddha and his spiritual quest but the physical features were inspired by the Greek God Apollo. This resemblance was so striking that it gave rise to an entire school of art called Gandhara school.

2. SECTION-A: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

On the global map, Gandhara sits at the junction of Central Asia, South Asia and Mediterranean world. Gandhara was the ancient name given to the region stretching along the western bank of the Indus River, encompassing present-day Swat, Buner, and Bajaur. Renowned for its fertile, well-watered valleys and pleasant climate, the region flourished in ancient world as a vibrant cultural centre for artistic and other forms of expressions. Located at the crossroads of India and Western Asia, Gandhara occupied a unique frontier position. It was simultaneously connected to both Indian and western world: influenced by both yet leaving its own footprints on the landscape of world art.¹ It witnessed a steady wave of foreign rule including Achaemenid, Hellenistic, Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, Indo-Parthian and Kushans. This resulted in the development and growth of a very cosmopolitan culture in this region which, among other platforms, found its expression in sculpture too.

After Alexander's invasion in the 4th century BCE, the North-Western frontier region became the centre of Greek settlement for centuries, transmitting Hellenistic artistic tradition into Indian sculptural traditions. The Indo-Greek kingdoms and later Greko-Bactrian states were hugely influenced by Buddhism. Under Kushan Empire (1st to 3rd centuries CE), Buddhism received imperial patronage stimulating large scale artistic production. The prosperity of Buddhism in Gandhara was greatly sustained by its wealthy patrons, who generously funded the flourishing of sculptural art across the region.

Greco-Buddhist art emerged as a hybrid style combining Greek style of sculpture with Buddhist themes. It represented the meeting of western naturalism with Indian religious thoughts. Even in Mauryan period, Hellenism impacted art in India. It left a distinct and undeniable imprint on Mauryan India, as evidenced by archaeological discoveries at Basarh and ancient Vaiśali.²

The Gandhara school of art having Graeco-Buddhist sculpture can be safely dated to 1st century BCE and continued its abundant production till 3rd and 4th centuries C.E. With time there was increasing Indianisation of themes and style. In terms of imagery and stylistic representation, Gandhara art was influenced, to a great extent, by a localized form of Hellenistic tradition. Emerging from the legacy of Greek artistic practices in Afghanistan and the Punjab, it was adapted to depict themes rooted in Indian culture and religion. As Greek influence extended its sphere from Greece itself to Iranian regions and thence to India, Gandhara art can be seen as an eastern continuation of Hellenistic civilization enriched with Iranian influences. It represents the expansion of Indian cultural expression presented through a distinctly western artistic lens.³

3. SECTION-B: THE CLASSICAL IDEAL: APOLLO AS PROTOTYPE

Apollo occupied a central place in ancient Greek mythology and was one of the most revered Olympian deities. He was the son of Zeus and Leto, and the twin brother of Artemis. Apollo was associated with a wide range of spheres, including the sun and light, music and poetry, archery, prophecy, and the oracles. He was also regarded as a deity of healing and medicine, while simultaneously possessing the power to bring about plague and disease as well as their cure.⁴

Apollo is attributed with certain physical features. Classical Greek sculpture emphasized idealized human form as a manifestation of divine perfection. God Apollo is chiselled with such perfection as harmonious proportions, youthful physique, symmetry, calm and rational expression and controlled naturalism.⁵ Apollo became the archetypal embodiment of these ideals. The statues of Apollo present him as the possessor of a perfect human body- serene, balanced and timeless.

Gandhar Buddha images display striking parallels with this classical model. The Gandhara school represented the Buddha with a youthful face resembling Apollo and dressed him in garments similar to the Greek God. Specific features include oval face and straight nose, deep set eyes and defined brows, wavy hair arranged in curls and calm detached expression.

But it should be observed that while the Gandhara Buddha is Hellenic in style, He is essentially embedded in Indian tradition. The iconography of Gandharan art remained fundamentally Indian, as is evident in the depiction of the Buddha as a seated yogi and spiritual teacher—an idea largely absent from western philosophical traditions. Likewise, the gestures or mudras such as Abhaya and Dhyana were distinctly Indian in origin and meaning. What Gandharan art primarily borrowed from the Hellenistic world was its plastic and stylistic treatment. In this sense, the Gandharan sculptor did not transform Apollo into the Buddha; rather, he carved the Buddha through an Apollonian artistic form.⁶

For several centuries after Buddha's death, Buddhist art refrained from depicting him in human form. It was aniconic in its illustrations. Since the early Buddhist tradition discouraged the direct representation of the Buddha in human form, artists of the early Indian school faced considerable difficulty in visually narrating the events of his life. As a result, they largely limited their artistic depictions to the four major events associated with his final earthly existence—his Birth, Enlightenment, First Sermon, and Death.⁷ The Birth was symbolised by a Lotus flower or plant and the Illumination by the Pipal Tree (Aśvattha) in the shade of which Buddha got Bodhi or Enlightenment at Bodh Gaya. The recognised symbol of First Sermon was the 'Wheel of Law' (Dharmchakra) which the Buddha had set in motion and which has gone on revolving ever since. Sometimes the wheel was placed on the top of a pillar with two or more deer to symbolise the deer park where Buddha received knowledge. For the death of Buddha (Mahaparinirvana), the symbol was a mound or Stupa which his relics were enshrined.⁸

But by 1st century C.E, this aniconic phase ended and anthropomorphic images of Buddha began to appear simultaneously in Gandhara and Mathura. Gandharan examples display a strong Hellenistic influence, suggesting that the local artists had adopted Greco-Roman traditions of depicting gods in human form. But how did this shift happen? Since long, the Greeks had been chiselling the statues of their gods in human forms. They, like their devotees, had faces and bodies, wives and children and had lives much like human-beings. When Greek sculptors came in contact with their Indian counterparts, the latter now modelled their Buddha in anthropomorphic ways. Another explanation put forth by Bente Kiilerich is that the conversion of Buddha from aniconic to anthropomorphic was probably due to proselytising spirit of Buddhism. With its desire and efforts to spread its wings to regions far and near, where the old religions had the pictures of their gods, it became necessary to portray the object of worship in human form.⁹ Therefore, the onset of anthropomorphic image of Buddha happened in Gandhar either in standing or seated draped figure. Now the question is when it happened? A group of early reliefs from Butkara Stupa near Mingora in the area of Swat, Pakistan has a seated Buddha which dates between 1st century BCE and the early 1st century CE. After much debates and speculations, this came to be attributed to the earliest example of anthropomorphic Buddha.¹⁰ Hereafter the flow of the human form of Buddha from Gandhar never stopped.

4. SECTION-C: GANDHAR STYLE: FUSION OF CLASSICAL AND BUDDHIST ELEMENTS

With time, Gandhara sculptors adopted several features of Greek sculpture and started chiselling Buddha and other human sculptures through the lens of Apollo-like body structure. The naturalistic anatomy included realistic musculature, balanced physical proportions, three-dimensional modelling and sense of weight and volume. Greek conceptions of divine beauty emphasized idealised human form as a manifestation of divine perfection. Key features included harmonious proportions, youthful physique, symmetry, calm and rational expressions and controlled naturalism. Apollo, god of light, harmony and intellectual order became an archetypal embodiment of these ideals. Statues of Apollo presented him as having a perfect human body—serene, balanced and timeless. This artistic tradition probably influenced the Gandharan sculptors, who depicted the Buddha with a youthful and calm appearance similar to the Graeco-Roman images of gods and heroes. After His enlightenment, the Buddha anyway became a symbol of such characteristics as serenity and calmness. Therefore, it was not difficult for the Indian sculptors to observe the close resemblance of such physical expressions between Apollo and Buddha. In many cases, Gandharan sculptures closely resembled, and sometimes even copied, the classical representations of Apollo, the young god of light, and his twin sister Artemis.¹¹ Kumari. (2026)

The Buddha of Gandhar, other than having a youthful face resembling Apollo, is dressed in similar garments. He has an oval face and straight nose, deep and spirited eyes with defined brows, wavy hair arranged in curls and calm detached expressions. He is noticed with an Ushnisha, 12 Urna 13 and elongated ears indicating his divine position.

Figure 1



Figure 1 The Striking Similarity Between the Busts of Buddha and Apollo from Gandhar, the 'Ushnisha' the 'Urna' and the Curly Hair of Buddha Clearly Depict the Conversations of Sculptural Technology Between the Hellenic and Indian Sculptors.

https://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=https://i.ytimg.com/vi/IRnsjaLoCw/maxresdefault.jpg&tbid=pnX6lazlw9cy_M&vet=1&imgrefurl=https://www.youtube.com/watch?v%3DIRnsjaLoCw&docid=TzVtNfnEqAByxM&w=1280&h=720&source=sh/x/im/m1/2&kgs=e1441166f24f2224&shem=epsdc,shrtsdl&utm_source=epsdc,shrtsdl,sh/x/im/m1/2, Accessed on 11th March 2026

One of the most distinctive features of Gandhar Buddha is the treatment of monastic robe. No statue of Apollo is found without his drapery. It was a staple for all Greek and Roman statues. It probably reflected the contemporary clothing styles of these cultures. The sculptor of Gandhar draped Buddha in similar robe. Whether sitting or standing or even lying, Buddha is rarely without his robe. It either covers one shoulder or both. It is rendered with heavy cascading folds resembling Roman 'Toga'. The image of a standing Buddha at Takt-i-Bahi, an Indo-Parthian archaeological site of an ancient Buddhist monastery in Mardan, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, bears a striking resemblance to Apollo type in the execution of head and pose, and with Roman statue of Augustus in rendering of drapery. The cross-legged seated Buddha reflects the same elements. In creating the Apollonian style in Gandharan art, two important influences can be seen. The first was the image of Apollo himself, who was known not only as the god of music and arts, but also as a sun and nature deity linked with Helios. Gandharan artists expressed similarities between Apollo and the image of the Buddha. The second influence came from Indian artistic traditions. Sculptors followed the physical features and artistic rules mentioned in the *śilpa* texts and combined them with Graeco-Roman artistic styles. This blending created a new and unique form of Buddhist art that was quite different from the traditional Indian representation of the Buddha.¹⁴

Figure 2



Figures 2 The Easy Flow of Buddha's Drape (Right, Figure 3) Finds Its Precedence in the Folds of Apollo's Garment (Left Figure 2). <https://depositphotos.com/photo/statue-of-apollo-holding-a-lyre-12599818.html>, Accessed on 11th March 2026

Figure 3



Figures 3 The Easy Flow of Buddha's Drape (Right, Figure 3) Finds Its Precedence in the Folds of Apollo's Garment (Left Figure 2). [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gandhara_Buddha_\(tnm\).jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gandhara_Buddha_(tnm).jpeg), Accessed on 11th March 2026.

But despite borrowing heavily from Hellenistic art, the Gandhar artist still followed Indian themes. For instance, the Gandhar Buddha is always shown with four significant hand gestures called Mudras namely Abhaya mudra, Dhyana mudra, Dharmachakra mudra and Bhumisparśa mudra. These elements transform the classical divine youth into an enlightened teacher. These artistic traditions from Gandhara spread to other indigenous artistic traditions like Mathura and Amravati. They too developed a parallel form of Buddha emphasizing spiritual presence over physical realism.

The transition from Apollo to Buddha thus represents not merely a stylistic shift but a profound change in meaning.

Greek ideals:

- Celebrate physical beauty, vigour and vitality
- Presuppose perfect physical contours to embody divine presence.

Buddhist ideals:

- Highlight detachment and enlightenment: the key features of Buddha's personality
- Eyes expressing compassion and transcendence
- Emphasize that body is just a vehicle on the path of spiritual quest.

Thus, Classical harmony of physical perfections beautifully amalgamated into inner balance and spiritual enlightenment.

And the quest for Greek Gods in Indian perspective was not limited to Buddha alone. In Gandhar art, other Greek gods are often reflected in Buddhist deities. For instance, Zeus became Vajrapāni- an inseparable companion of Buddha. He is often depicted as wearing a dress of a Graeco-Parthian attendant called 'chiton'. Similarly, several other Greek gods and goddesses find their counterparts in Buddhist art. Demeter, the Earth-mother of Greeks turns into Haritī and Nike was translated into an Indian female spirit celebrating the Birth of Buddha. 15 In summing up the entire milieu, Ludwig Bachhofer believes that the sculptors of north-western India freely drew upon the imagery of the Olympian deities, adapting and reinterpreting them within a Buddhist framework for local audiences. Figures resembling Apollo and the Eubuleus type were transformed into representations of the Buddha, while deities such as Zeus, Hercules, Eros, Hermes, Dionysius, and Pan were recast in Buddhist roles, particularly as Vajrapāni, the constant attendant of the Enlightened One. Despite these transformations, the classical origins of these figures remained clearly visible in their facial features and artistic style, revealing unmistakable traces of their Hellenistic heritage.¹⁶

To sum up the study, it can be said that the Greco-Hellenic contribution to Gandhar art is:

- 1) The anthropomorphising of the Buddha representing the Greek physical contours.
- 2) Strong resemblance to Greek artistic style, particularly in the treatment of the robe, whose flowing drapery and natural fluidity reflect classical Hellenistic influence.
- 3) The plasticity of facial expression but with divine radiance.

The Buddhist or Indian contribution consists of:

- 1) The themes and content which include Buddhist subjects and symbolism.
- 2) The Indianized appearance of Buddha with piety, renunciation and spiritualism in every aspect of physical representation.

Thus, the transformation from Apollo to Buddha exemplifies the dynamic processes of cultural exchanges in ancient world. Classical Greek ideals of beauty, proportion and the divine representation were not just adopted in Indian context, rather, they were reinterpreted to fit into Buddhist religious and philosophical context. Through this combination of traditions, Gandhara artists created a powerful image of the Buddha which transcended the cultural boundaries and influenced the art of entire Asia for many centuries. The Gandharan Buddha therefore, demonstrates how interaction between different cultures can create new artistic forms that preserve elements of their original traditions while gaining new meaning.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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Ushnisha is a raised bump of hair on the head of Buddha which represents Supreme Wisdom and Enlightenment. It is one of the thirty-two Major Marks (Mahāpurush Lakṣaṇas) which, according to Buddhist tradition, symbolise a great being (Mahapuruṣa) such as Buddha.

Urṇa is a small circular mark located between the eyebrows of Buddha. According to Buddhist tradition, the Urṇa represents a supernatural sign of Spiritual Enlightenment and Divine Vision.

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