

Arts of Asia Lecture Series Fall 2017  
Art on the Move Across Asia and Beyond – Part I  
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Study Guide:

**“Convergence of Hellenism and Buddhism: Gandharan Art revisited”**

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A form of figurative sculpture born in the Gandhāran region between the second and the fifth centuries CE, Gandhāran art has a direct relationship with Buddhism and Hinduism as they flourished in India during the Kuṣāṇ Empire and reflects regional cross-cultural elements. In relation to other forms of figurative art depicting Buddha, particularly in Amaravati, the capital of the Sātavāhanas in Andhra, and in Mathura on the right bank of the Yamuna river, Buddhist art in Gandhāra is characterized by a unique style, the use of schist readily available in the region, a naturalism reminiscent of Greek Classical art, and an iconographic preference for episodes of the historical Buddha's life. When East met West new forms of art were born, and both Buddhism and Hinduism provided new grounds for innovative artistic expression. The presence of Greeks in the area since the conquest of Alexander the Great is an important historical fact. However, Gandhāran reliefs owe also a great deal to the Persian, Roman, Parthian, Scythian, and above all the Indian traditions. Through these interactions a new composite art, characterized by its singularity, was born in Gandhāra. Situated in today's northern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan, Gandhāra was the name of one of the eastern satrapies of the Persian Empire. It comprised mainly the fertile valleys of the lower Kabul and Swat rivers and the lower part of the upper Indus river, and was centred around the ancient cities of Pushkalavati (modern Peshawar) and Takṣaśilā (modern Taxila).

Art historians have repeatedly insisted upon the borrowings of Greek architectural elements, like Corinthian capitals with stylized alternating rows of acanthus leaves, adapted to a Buddhist context. The Greek Tyche (city-goddess), already popular in Indo-Greek coins and depicted in Buddhist art holding the cornucopia, is assimilated in Gandhāran art with Hariti, and she often appears next to the consort Pañcika, the god of wealth, as in the Iranian tradition of Pharro and Ardoxsho. Heracles was popular in Central Asia and India as the symbol of terrestrial glory. Vajrapāṇi, the thunderbolt-holding protector of Buddha, is

depicted reinterpreting the traditional pose of Heracles: a *vajra* (thunderbolt) substitutes for the usual club. The Indian conquest of Alexander the Great has a mythic analogy in the Indian Triumph of Dionysos. Dionysos, the god of wine, inspired many Buddhist artists of Central Asia and Gandhara. Judging from the archaeological findings this god was particularly popular among the Scythians and Greeks. As the god who taught Indians how to cultivate vine, he is shown with Ariadne drinking wine prepared by his companions. Sileni, satyrs, Pan, and other fertility demons are shown on Buddhist reliefs drinking, dancing, harvesting, kissing or indulging in sexual intercourse. These Dionysian scenes could be understood as a symbolic representation of the Middle Region of gandharvas or yakṣas. The conquest of Alexander the Great in Gandhāra at the end of the fourth century BCE continued to have an impact for another six centuries in the artistic expressions of Gandhāran artists. However, following a transitional period, Buddhist and Hindu iconography developed into a codified orthodoxy in which textual descriptions were carried out with scrupulous accuracy.

#### **List of the important dates:**

Alexander the Great's conquest of the eastern satrapies of the Persian Empire (including Gandhāra) between 329 and 326 BCE

Under Aśoka (*circa* 270 to 230 BCE), Buddhism became the court religion and Maurya Empire reached to its territorial zenith.

Diodotos (*circa* 250-230 BCE), the Seleucid satrap of Bactria revolted against his suzerain and created an independent kingdom in Bactria.

Greek era founded by the Graeco-Bactrian Agathocles or Antimachos I: 176-5 BCE.

Saka era or era of Vikrama, founded by the Indo-Scythian Azes: 47 BCE.

Reign of Gondophares, founder of the Indo-Parthian kingdom: 10-30 CE.

Reign of Kujula Kadphises, founder of the Kushan empire: 30-85 or 30-90 CE.

Reign of Vima Kadphises: 100-127 or 105-127 CE.

Kaniṣka I: 127-150 CE. The Buddhist art flourished in Gandhāra during his reign.

Huviṣka ascended the throne *circa* 150 CE and ruled for about thirty-eight years.

Vasudeva I, last of the Great Kuṣāṇs ascended to the throne around 188 CE.

Gandhāra had been occupied by various Kidarite principalities from the early fourth century CE.

The Hephthalite entered Bactria early in the fifth century CE and pushed their invasion toward Gandhāra.

Song-Yun traveled through this region in 518–21 and reported that the Huns had destroyed the country.

Xuanzang visited India around 644 and found Buddhism in decline in Gandhāra and Hinduism in the ascendant.

**Books to read:**

*Gandhara, the Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan. Legends, Monasteries, and Paradise*, Kust und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, Berlin, Zürich, 2009/10.

John Boardman, *The Diffusion of Classical Art in Antiquity*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1994.

Osmund Bopearachchi, *Seven Weeks after the Buddha's Enlightenment: Contradictions in Text, Confusions in Art*, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 2016.

Vidya Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art. Visual Narrative of India*, Munshiram Manoharlal, first edition 1997, New Delhi, second edition 2005.

Alfred Foucher, *L'Art gréco-bouddhique du Gandhāra*, 3 volumes, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris, 1905, 1918, 1922.

Harold Ingholt, *Gandhāran Art in Pakistan*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1957.

Isao Kurita, *Gandhāran Art*, vol. I *The Buddha's Life Story*, vol. II *The world of the Buddha*, first edition 1988-90, Revised and enlarged edition, 2003, Nigensha, Tokyo.

John Rosenfield, *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967.

Wladimir Zwalf, *A Catalogue of the Gandhāra Sculptures in the British Museum*, 2 vol., British Museum Press, London, 1996.