

How did Hellenistic trends influence Buddhist art and architecture?

Jivan-deep Kandola ❖ Classics & Ancient History ❖ Supervised by: Clare Rowan.

Art and architecture define a specific culture or community. Appreciating diverse cultures is important, as we are always confronted with many challenges when considering our own identity and how we interact with one another. Hellenistic art is Greek art that was created after the death of Alexander the Great, and it has shaped western culture. Exploring its impact on other cultures reveals how it has changed people's understanding of their own environment.

Method

I worked with the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Library and Blythe House to gain access to original artefacts. I conducted discussions with specialists to analyse the effect Hellenistic trends had on Buddhist art and beyond. A limitation to the method is that I did not consider the Indian perception of Hellenistic art. However, the project encourages us to become aware of how Hellenistic trends have had a far reaching impact throughout history.

Findings

In 326 BC, Alexander the Great was defeated by the Indian King Porus. However, his legacy remained for decades within Buddhist art. The Buddhapada was a symbol to help worship the Buddha. It was formed as early as the eighteenth century BC. However, after Alexander's campaign, the Buddha was then symbolised in human form. The Buddhists were clearly inspired by the Greeks and adopted Hellenistic methods to glorify the Buddha and the spiritual journey to Nirvana.



Hercules and his mistress Omphale



Marriage of Dionysius and Ariadne



Sea monsters began to symbolise endurance.

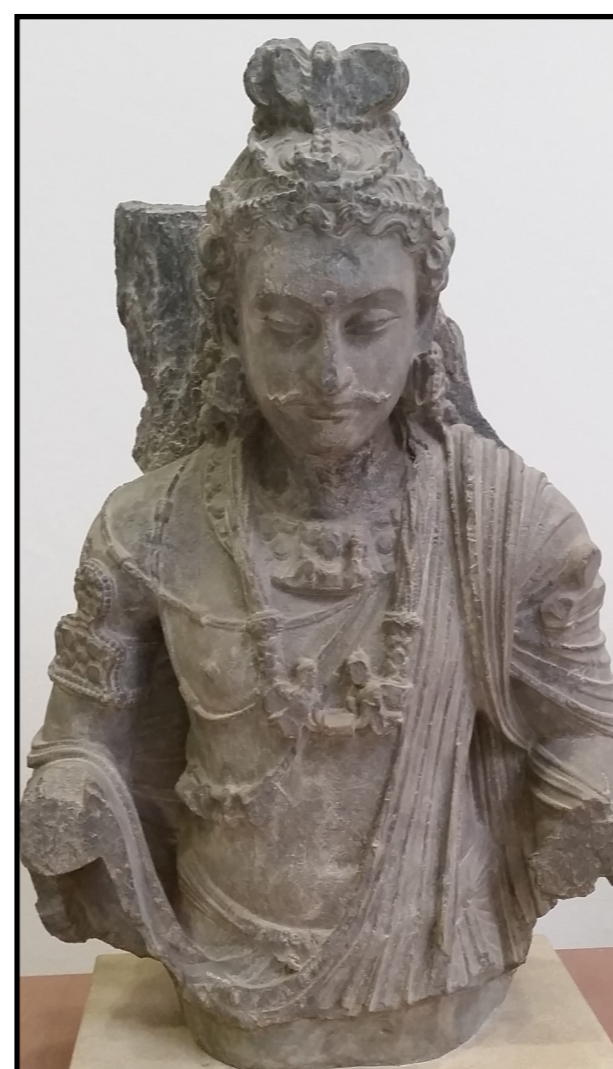
Offering-trays

These were used in Buddhist Temples for religious or practical purposes, and decorated with simple geometric shapes. After Alexander's campaign three key themes appeared: Dionysius, Hercules and Sea Monsters.



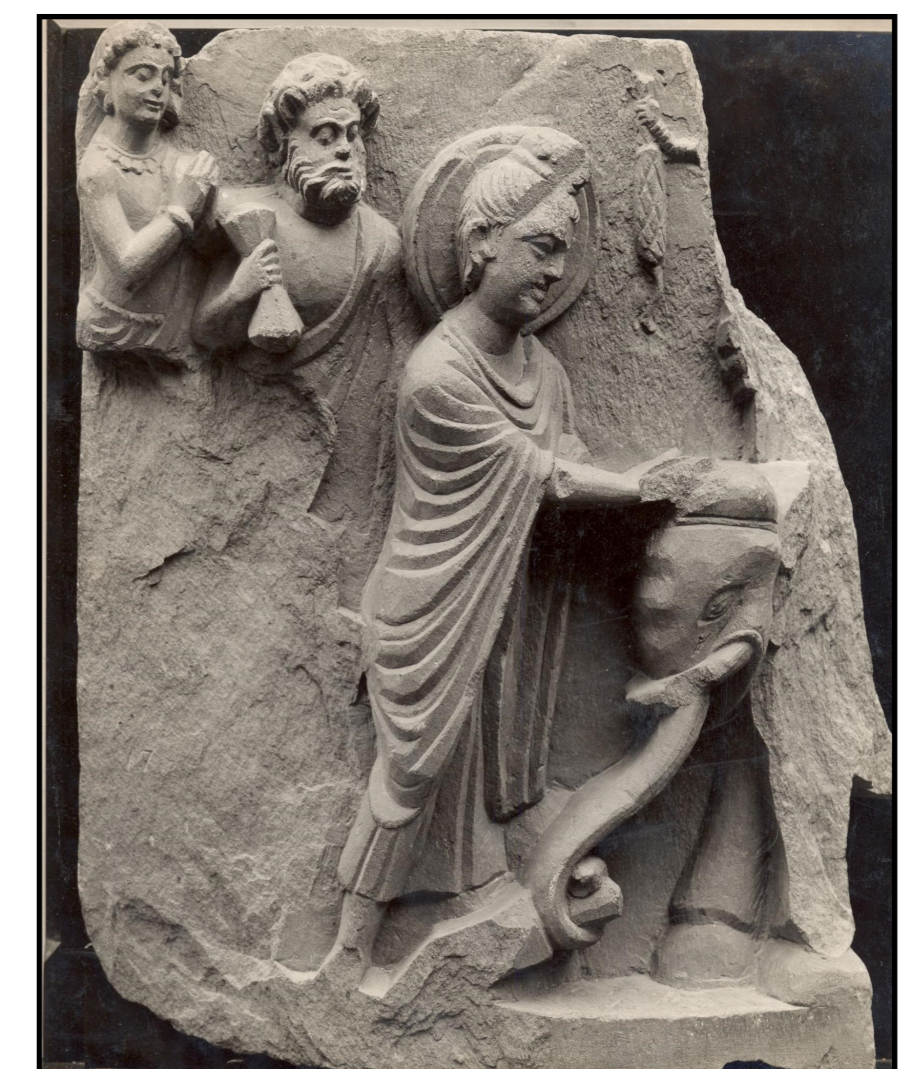
Sculpture

The Hellenistic ideal human form, the slender and exaggerated musculature mimicking a Greek athlete, was adopted to embody the ideal human: The Buddha. Human representations were made centuries after the Buddha's death. Therefore, certain attributes, such as elongated ear lobes and the ushnisha on top of his head, are used to identify him. This concept was a Hellenistic tradition as the Greeks created symbols to represent their divinities and heroes.



Bodhisattvas

Sculpture became more diverse as more characters were represented. Kanishka I, leader of the Kushan dynasty, had used Buddhism as a method of creating a civilised empire. Therefore, Buddhist art developed from a spiritual focus to an embodiment of culture. This method of using art to make a statement was commonly used by the Greeks.



Narrative Depictions

The legends from Buddhist teachings were depicted. They maintained a Hellenistic flair: the drapery followed the style of a peplos, acanthus leaves were used, and the importance of different characters was communicated through size.

Conclusion

Alexander the Great's campaign in India was ill-fated, but it had the power to transform the material culture associated with Buddhism. The Buddhist core theme of using art to convey the greatness of the Buddha remained, yet his representation was inspired by the Hellenistic methods of glorifying their gods and themselves. Ultimately, this highlights how society learns to embrace different cultures by taking the successful and most influential aspects and adapting them for their own philosophies. It proves that we are all learning and that we can benefit from others in order to live in the best environment.

References

©Trustees of the British Museum. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Pons J (2011) *From Gandharan trays to Gandharan Buddhist art : the persistence of Hellenistic motifs from the second century BC and beyond* (Oxford:Archaeopress)