



Sculptures of Gandhara Buddha: The Eclectic Art

* Rimpy Agarwal

* ASSISTANT PROFESSOR APEEJAY COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS, JALANDHAR (PUNJAB), (AFFILIATED TO GURU NANAK DEV UNIVERSITY, AMRITSAR)

ABSTRACT

All over the world, the primary goal of art has always been to spread religion and to convey the teachings of saints to the people and to make them recognizable with these teaching, since ancient times. For the purposes of spreading Buddhism, the Buddhist monks also used art for spiritual and literatus improvement of people. In India, initially Buddhist sculptures were made in symbols, but Emperor Kanishka gave concrete shape to Buddha idols in Gandhara region. Gandhara art can rightly be called 'Eclectic Art'. As Kanishka was a foreigner, therefore the impact of art of other countries was quite obvious. Although these sculptures could not achieve the spiritual level of Indian style, yet first Buddha figure was constructed in Gandhara itself and the form of model was devised in Indian Buddhist art.

Keywords : : Buddha Sculpture, Emperor Kanishka, Gandhara Art, Eclectic Art.

Introduction:

It was the art of Indian sculpture that came into existence after the Pre-historic wall paintings in India, which began due to religion. This religion originated from Gautama Buddha. About 556 B.C. at Lumbini, near Kapilvastu, Gautama Buddha was born who belonged to warrior caste (Kshatriya). He renounced the world at the age of 29 in search of truth and started preaching. The followers of Buddhism spread its teachings in such a way that even the forthcoming generations, got involved in the development of Buddhist art. Most of the artifacts were made by the monks whose main purpose was to spread Buddhism extensively. The Buddhist monks were themselves artists who used art for spiritual and literatus improvement of people. For them beauty was religion and love, not pleasure and entertainment.

From the ancient times, art has played a great role in bonding people with God, spiritually and mystically, as it is one of the best forms of worshipping the God. Indian art differs from European art in one particular aspect whereas in Greek and Italian art Gods are shown as the most beautiful men. On the contrary Indian men are shown as God. The finest contribution of Buddhism to Indian life was made in the realm of architecture and sculpture.¹ Asoka who was the Emperor of Maurya dynasty is credited to spread Buddha religion and hence forth at his own discretion took the initiative to preach Buddha teachings through art. After that the main centers of embodiment of Buddha religion were the relief panels of Bharut, Sanchi and Amravati stupa. Moreover Lord Buddha was represented through symbols. But Kushana dynasty gave a concrete form to the Buddha sculpture.

Under the Kushanas, architecture, sculpture and painting were main art forms done in the areas of Afganistan, North Western India and Punjab (present day Pakistan). The age of Kushanas (1st C.A.D) was an important epoch in the History of Indian sculpture. King Kanishka ruled his vast empire from his capital Peshawar and he was a great follower of Kujula the last Greek Prince of the Kabul valley. Kanishka achieved the greatest success in the field of sculpture. The Gandhara and the Mathura School of sculpture prospered during this age & beautiful pieces of sculpture were built at different places. Buddha never himself visited Gandhara but religious text of Buddhism rendered here very gracefully under the Kushana

School. Mathura adopted the prolonged continuation of native Indian School² and the artisans of Mathura were inspired from early Yaksha figures. But Gandhara art reminds us that developed art, which emerged with the amalgamation of Buddhist and Hellenistic form.³ Gandhara art was declared official under the aegis of Kushan Emperor and his successor. Gandhara art generally known as Graeco-Roman art. But the fact is, the impact of Greek is seemingly diminished in Gandhara art and impact of the Hellenistic phase is only prominent. Actually it is more close to Roman art.⁴ The Gandhara art has been called by several names Graeco Roman, Graeco-Buddhist, Indo-Greek etc. Though, it was inspired by Buddhism, its chief characteristic was the realistic representation of human figures. Although Kanishka was quite interested in the idols of Buddha, yet the spirituality level was very less. But these open eyed images of Buddha structure were so beautifully made that it resembled precisely to 'Apollo', the Greek god of beauty.⁵

Gandhara art can rightly be called eclectic art as it unfolded diverse and remarkable skill. Its not only the Roman and Greek but also many countries like Syrian, Persia and India which has left it profound mark in the works of Gandhara sculptures. Its development started from 50 B.C to 75A.D, but it witnessed its prosperity under the Kushana dynasty of a prolonged period from first to fifth century A.D.⁶ As I explained earlier that Buddha was represented through symbols but during the Christian era and the transitional period it marked the embodiment of Buddha, showing its concrete and actual form through images.⁷

Gandhara art was not homologous because the impact of varied places was distinctly visible, secondly the material used to devise was not alike. The school flourished under the Peshawar Valley and west of Indus they used fine grained local stone and other school which developed in Afghanistan, they used lime-stucco material for their sculptures.⁸ The peculiar stone used to construct these images was quite brittle and it got easily disrupted while the stone was chiseled. So the images from these areas were not carved with minute details.⁹ Gandhara art was absolutely vulnerable to Hellenistic approach but due to the diligent effort of artists it culminated to Indianization. These artists preferred to choose the Hellenistic world as their model and with great dexterity they juxta-

posed the Greek and local ideas according to the Buddhist sect¹⁰

As a matter of fact that an influence of foreign art existed on Indian art, one reason being Kanishka himself an outlander and secondly he designated and delegated Western Hellenistic stone carvers to construct the Buddhist related icons. These experienced hands set up establishing the exotic standing figures and this impact of western art was distinctly visible on the newly constructed images. Constructing the torso on then befitting the visage according to the subject was an amazing idea of these innovative stone carvers of Roman workshops. Apart from Buddha images Bodhisattva sculptures were also done here in good quantity. Bohisattva means Buddha-to-be a being capable of enlightenment.¹¹

Although bearing all the iconographical marks and traits of Indian tradition, Gandhara art could not achieve a spirituality level or inner-breath quality in these images. In the open-eyed images of Buddha, the influence of Graeco-Roman is quite distinctive. The toga covering both shoulders of Yogi, curls in hair, with physiognomy and expression unknown to Indian norms. Some time with a moustache or turban, with these features they depicted Buddha as Apollo. Buddha and Bodhisattva images made in Mathura were purely Indian and completely consistent in the sculptor's self imposed abstraction. On the contrary, the Gandhara Buddha a resourceful adaptation of Indian notion and foreign in conception and outlook. The Gandhara head is inquisitive mixture of abstraction and realism.¹² All the Bodhisattvas are shown in wearing turban, jewelry, Muslim skirt, sandals on his feet, a costume (a rich non-monastic clothing) that was an adaptation of the actual dress of Kushana and Indian nobles. The jewelry of these royal statues was a depiction of Hellenistic and Samatian gold, created by western artisans. A definite borrowing from Roman art was the method of representation the *Jataka* stories (pre birth stories of Buddha), which are not like the early Indian style of Bharut and Sanchi. They are of course narrative, but not shown on a single fragment. Each episode is depicted in a single scene and on separate panel and from right to left.¹³

It was not a new thing to learn that foreign art impacted Indian art, as one could move back to the time of Ashoka and learn that motif figures of his time exerted the supreme influence of Iranian art. One cannot deny the fact of Gandhara figures to be considered ancient than the Indian Buddhist figures and the probable possibility lies in the fact that the first Buddha figure was constructed in Gandhara itself and the form of model was devised in Indian Buddhist art.¹⁴

The proportion of these Gandhara sculptures is too similar with the Roman and early Christian idols. The proportion used in these sculptures did not match the Indian standard but five heads to total height. These Apollonian Buddhas can be recognized by their distinct features like *urna* or the whorl of hair between the eyes, the hair tied at the back by a small cord, and facial features are, a regular Greek nose continuing the line of forehead, arched eyebrows in relief and soft epicene. Apollonian facial type of the early Buddha idols gradually assumes the mask like, arctic character of late antique sculpture. Buddha is shown here in adolescent features. Gandhara School of art distinguishes itself from other Indian school of art, from the fact that no one sculpture was brought to completion and did not possess fullness as the front part of the sculpture appeared to be round in shape but flat or unfinished from its backside. It is feasible to imagine these innovative minds worked with the intention of displaying these idols in the niches of Buddhist chapels.¹⁵ Therefore the figurines influenced by the Roman and Greek culture could neither satisfy the Indian scholars nor could match the Indian standards.

The Gandhara School deserves our admiration for their unique contribution that extended for beyond the perimeters of their province. In spite of the fact that Gandhara School represent eclecticism but is still acknowledged as the principal stream of Indian art. Though the patrons of Gandhara art were alien but they wanted to exhibit and flourish Indian religion widely through art. And this memorable and worth notable initiative not only has dated in the records of history as the principal art but will also influence the generation to come.

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