



# From Gandhāra to Dunhuang: The Evolution of Buddhist Art Along the Silk Road

<sup>1\*</sup> Irum Malik

<sup>2</sup> Kuiyi Shen

## Abstract

The Silk Road functioned as a living corridor for the transmission of Buddhist art, carrying Gandhāran visual traditions eastward into the heart of Chinese sacred culture at Dunhuang. Its role extended far beyond mere trade — it functioned as a catalyst for artistic innovation and cultural syncretism, enabling the cross-cultural exchange that fundamentally shaped Buddhist iconography across Central and East Asia. This study focuses particularly on the iconographic journey of Avalokiteshvara — from its earliest sculptural manifestations in the Peshawar and Swat Valleys of Gandhāra to its remarkable transformation in the cave murals of Dunhuang — as a primary case study for understanding this profound artistic transmission. Gandhāran workshops, shaped by Hellenistic, Persian, and Indian currents, produced a distinctive visual language marked by naturalistic human forms, fluid drapery, and precise Greco-Roman anatomical rendering. As these artistic conventions traveled the Silk Road, they were not simply reproduced at Dunhuang but were thoughtfully reinterpreted through a Chinese aesthetic sensibility. Key iconographic markers — the Amitabha effigy in the crown, the lotus attribute, elaborate royal ornamentation, and the compassionate downward gaze — survived this transformation, connecting the Gandhāran Avalokiteshvara directly to the Dunhuang Guanyin. The research further examines narrative art traditions, notably the King Sivi Jataka, which powerfully illustrates how Gandhāran storytelling imagery was absorbed and reframed within Chinese artistic conventions. This research argues that Dunhuang art represents not mere borrowing but a creative synthesis, where foreign visual traditions were absorbed, adapted, and ultimately enriched by local artistic imagination. Outcomes of this research offer new perceptions to understand the intricacies of cultural transmission and how regional settings shape the adaptation of foreign artistic traditions, producing a distinctive Sino-Buddhist heritage that continues to resonate across East Asia.

**Keywords:** Silk Road; Gandhāran Art; Dunhuang; Buddhist Iconography; Avalokiteshvara; Cultural Transmission; Narrative Imagery.

## 1. Introduction

The Silk Road is considered one of the oldest and significant trade routes in history and helped connect the East and West by exchanging goods (e.g., spices, silk, precious metals) and allowing the transfer of ideas, religions and art, which is a significant factor in the development of cultures in each area of the Silk Road. This vast network of thousands of kilometers of roads stretched from the Mediterranean to East Asia and promoted intercultural transfers.

One of the most meaningful cultural exchanges between East and West alongside the Silk Road was the impact of Gandhāra's Greco-Buddhist art on the Buddhist art of Dunhuang, a key center for Buddhism in China. From the first century BCE to the fifth century Common Era, Gandhāra, situated today in Pakistan's Northern area and Afghanistan's Eastern area, served as a major center for the enhancement of Buddhist knowledge and artistic expression. This regional art is unique in its combination of Hellenistic, Persian, and Indic inspirations that resulted in the distinctive style known as Greco-Buddhist art which characterized realistic representations of the anthropomorphic form of Buddha; elaborate drapery; and humanlike depictions of the Bodhisattvas. The style, which varied from former symbolic representations of Buddhist imagery, became one of the distinguishing features of Gandhāran art and left a lasting impact on the cultural practices of the regions connected by the Silk Road.

The growing influence of Buddhism through the Silk Road led to an increase in the number of artistic standards connected to Buddhism. The city of Dunhuang from the 4th to the 14th century, (present day Gansu Province, China) was a significant cultural and artistic center for Buddhism because of its central location on the Silk Road. The Mogao caves of Dunhuang are referred to as the "Caves of the Thousand Buddhas". The caves, which were rigorously painted and numerous sculptures were created with utmost religious zeal depicting Buddhist themes, provide empirical evidence of the rich legacy of creative output that developed in this specific region. The caves provide a clear example of how the creative traditions of the Silk Road influenced the area, particularly those from Gandhāra (Whitfield & Whitfield, 2015).

The relation between Gandhāran artistic concepts and Dunhuang art demonstrates an ongoing process of creative adoption and revolution, showing both continuities and innovations in Buddhist iconography along the Silk Road as a medium for cultural interchange. This paper investigates how the creative exchanges between Gandhāra and Dunhuang were conducted on a large scale, particularly by tracing the transmission of and subsequent adaptations of Gandhāra's Greco-Buddhist forms in the regional context of Dunhuang. While the creative techniques used in Gandhāran sculpture were transported to Dunhuang, these techniques were not simply reproduced; rather, they were integrated into the existing framework of Chinese art leading to the development of a new art style which exemplified both the continuities and the innovative aspects of the Gandhāran prototypes. Therefore, the art of Mogao Cave represents a unique synthesis of Indian, Iranian, Greek, and Chinese artistic conventions, illustrating the complex interplay of cross-cultural transfers and local creativity that inspired or influenced the distinctive character of the Buddhist art of Mogao Caves (Fong, 1992, pp. 45–49).

This paper aims to provide an understanding of how artistic and cultural traditions were exchanged throughout history across the Silk Road through a comprehensive study of the cross-cultural movement of these traditions. Additionally, the study focuses on how cross-cultural interaction contributed to the development of Buddhist Art throughout Eastern Asia.

## 2. Gandhāra, its History and Art

### 2.1 The Term Gandhāra

The nomenclature “Gandhāra” has been found in many historical documents. The term “Gandhāra” is derived from two Sanskrit words. “Gand” means fragrance and “Hāra” means a specific place or zone. Therefore, the phrase “Gandhāra” literally means “the land of fragrance”. The term “Gandhāra” has its first written reference in the Rigveda. In the Rigveda the term “Gandhāra” is defined as a region that exists in the North-West sector of India. Subsequent references to the term can also be seen in the Apastamba (named in Angas and Magadhas) and in the manuscripts of the Scriptures Hiramyaesi and Baudhayana. The name Gandhāra is documented by several other Greek historians including Herodotus, Hekataios, Ptolemy and Strabo.(Ali & Qazi, 2008).

## 2.2 Geography

Gandhāra is a mountainous area lying at the intersection of the Himalayas and Hindu Kush mountain ranges meet (Zwalf, 1996). Geographically, Gandhāra is located in modern day North-Western area of Pakistan and Afghanistan’s eastern area (Fig. 1) and is characterized by an abundance of water and forested valleys. Due to its strategic location at the crossroads of India, Central Asia, and Western Asia, the geography of Gandhāra was ideal for advancing cultural and artistic exchange between these regions of the ancient world. When traveling through India from 629-647 AD, the well-known Chinese monk Hiuen Tsang (Xuanzang, trans. Beal, 1884) described Gandhāra as covering the territory on the west side of the Indus River; this included the Peshawar valley and the current cities of Swat, Buner, and Bajaur.

## 2.3 Gandhāra Art

Gandhāra Art primarily is devotional art which is a representation of the Philosophy of Buddhism. Evidence of a strong Buddhist devotion can be found through the large number of Buddhist stupas built in the Peshawar Basin, Swat Valley and Taxila. These great stupas at Gandhāra were meant to house the Buddha’s remains and were zealously decorated with relief carvings on their walls featuring various Buddhist imageries, passages from the life of the Buddha, stories of the Buddha’s previous lives (Jatakas) and ornamental elements (Zwalf, 1996). The Primary purpose of Gandhāra art was to disseminate Buddhism through the numerous sculptures created in stone, stucco, terracotta, bronze and paintings. These art pieces were made for the Buddha’s followers who had their places of worship in the stupas and monasteries located throughout the entire region of Gandhāra. The goal of Gandhāra art was to inspire belief among its adherents (Salomon, 1999, p. 88).

## 2.4 The Development of Gandhāra Art

In the first few centuries CE, Gandhāra was a major center for both the study of Buddhism and the display of artistic expression. Due to its geographic location at the intersections of various trade routes connecting the Mediterranean, Central Asia, and South Asia, Gandhāra was a central point of contact for a wide variety of cultures. The conquest of Alexander the Great had a major influence on the style of art in Gandhāra by incorporating elements of Hellenistic (Greek) culture into the area. The combination of Greek, Persian and Indian forms of art led to the development of a new type of art that would become known as Greco-Buddhist art and be identified with Gandhāra (Boardman, 1994, p. 145). One of the most prevalent forms of representation in Gandhāran art is the depiction of the Buddha as an anthropomorphized being, and this depiction has characteristics similar to those found in Greek sculpture of the time under the rule of the Kushans (see Figs. 3 & 4). This is a very different way than the Buddha was represented in earlier times when the majority of representations of the Buddha were either aniconic or symbolic. The use of the Greek influence can be seen in the

realistic depictions of humans, the elaborate and detailed drapery and the overall sense of realism found in the works of art (Thapar, 2002, p. 192).

In the case of Gandhāran Buddhist art, the statements made by Marco Galli should be noted for the reason that he posits that the concept of 'influence', when referring to Graeco-Roman elements, is misleading and inadequate as it implies a one-way impact. Instead, 'transformation' better describes the process of exchange and adaptation of creative ideals that occur due to the evolving cultural and political environments and represent an ongoing dialogue between civilizations (Galli, 2011).

Buddha representations began to appear in Gandhāra and Mathura (a site located in Central India) during the 1st century of the Common Era. These representations of the Buddha were used differently by artists from the regions; Gandhāran artists depicted the Buddha using a vibrant and narrative style, whereas the depictions of the Buddha by Mathuran artists represented him as being emblematic and static (Blair, 2009). The events that led to the emergence of the Buddha images have yet to be completely explained, however the emergence of these images has often been interpreted as an integral component of the overall transition toward lay religiosity, devotion to the Buddha, and the conceptualization of the Buddha as an approachable savior. Understanding the depiction of the Buddha in the context of Hellenistic religion provides insight into Gandhāran Buddhism. Hellenistic influences (such as the facial features) led to a greater emphasis on the supernatural powers of the Buddha, which is evident in the depictions of the Buddha found in Gandhāran art produced during the early Common Era in Northwest India (Blair, 2009) (see Figures 5, 6, 7, 8).

Thus, Gandhāran art demonstrates the broad fusion of elements from India, China, Persia, Greece, and Rome. The political and economic environments that were present in this area, such as imperial patronage and urban growth, allowed for a large-scale dissemination of Buddhism through this area. Apart from its wealth and religious vitality, the Gandhāran region functioned as spirited cultural environment in which diverse traditions converged and interacted. This merger of cultures led to the creation of a unique artistic legacy; over time, these numerous influences came together and developed a single, unified innovative style as exemplified in the Gandhāran Buddha statue (Figure 8) and other works of art.

### **3. Gandhāra and the Silk Route: Cultural Exchange**

Beginning with the history of the Silk Road and the geography of Gandhāra (figure 9), we see how the cultural exchange and blending of different traditions has shaped the course of many Asian civilizations. This is due to its location at the crossroads of Hellenistic, Persian, Indian, and Central Asian cultures; thus the region has been greatly impacted by Hellenistic influence, and the customs of Buddhism, Gandhāran art, and the extensive trade routes of the time. In this regard Alfred Foucher is often referred to as the "Father of Gandhāra Studies" for his recognition of the great importance of Gandhāra as an area of exchange and diffusion of culture across India, Iran, Central Asia, and the Hellenistic world (Neelis, 2011, p. 240).

#### **3.1 The Meeting Point of Civilizations**

Badshah Sardar and Tahir Saeed provide a comprehensive description of the trade routes of Silk Road and the cultural exchange among civilizations. The Silk Route was an amazing caravan route from xi'an in China to Rome in Italy (figure 10) and its total length was about 7,000 km (Figure 10), and this first bridge between East and West civilizations, has been operational for millennia by the 3rd century bc. The Silk Road carried Chinese silk into Europe and woolen clothes, perfumes, precious jewels, gold vessels, coins and glassware into China and more than that the Silk Road brought all

these different civilizations together with their religions, scientific and technological advances and commerce also. Throughout the course of history, the people who participated in the Silk Road have exchanged cultural values and developed new ideas through this channel.

Beginning with the city of Kashgar, the Great Silk Road was divided into two major paths: the Western path crossed the "Roof of the World" (the Pamir Mountains), and passed through cities such as Samarkand, Balkh, Merv, Nissa, Parthia, Antioch; from there, they continued their journey by sea to Rome and Alexandria. The Southern path went directly to Tashkurgan in order to pass over the Karakorum mountains and travel to the ancient Buddhist University at Taxila, and the site of the origin of the Gandhāra Civilization. Each of these two primary destinations for the caravans were located on opposite sides of the Indus River; thus, Gandhāra served as an important "melting pot" of various cultures that developed a unique blend of cultural and artistic traditions (Badshah Sardar & Saeed, 2020).

### **3.2 Threads of Devotion: Weaving Buddhist Art on the Silk Route**

The first movement of Buddhism occurred from India toward Gandhāra which is also the gateway to the Silk Road; at this point the initial form of Buddhism was internationalized through an intermixing of many cultures. At the same time that Christianity had begun to spread, Buddhism had made its robust foothold within the Tarim Basin, then had begun to move into the Chinese empire and by the middle of the Yong Ping era of Emperor Ming, Buddhism had been formally introduced. The introduction of Buddhism to China began during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), utilizing trade routes on the Silk Road. This is illustrated by the presence of Indian and Central Asian art styles in early Chinese Buddhist art; illustrating the exchange of cultural influences (Fig. 12). By the 5th century, Chinese artists were adjusting their stylistic preferences to accommodate the subject matter of the Buddha (Magnata, 2024).

The movement of Buddhist Devotion through the Silk Road was also used as an artistic means for transferring Gandhāran art from region to region with great success in particular to China. Travelers that traveled on the Silk Road such as monks, merchants, and pilgrims had a key role in spreading the cultural exchange by transporting both the religious scripture and rituals of Buddhism while preserving the artistic traditions of Gandhāra (Whitfield & Whitfield, 2015). Travelers crossing the Silk Road carried the creative influences of Gandhāra throughout Central Asia and into China and thus greatly impacted the development of Buddhist art (Figure 11).

### **3.3 Artistic Styles of Early Chinese Buddhist Imagery Inspired by Gandhāra Through the Silk Road**

A possible origin for testimony of Gandhāran Buddhist art's impact on Chinese Buddhist art is in the many key sites in China which were associated with the Silk Road. Much of this evident is visible in the earliest depictions of the Buddha and other Buddhist iconographical styles adopted in China by indigenous artists when they immersed and modified Gandharan models (Figures 14 & 15).

Yuvraj identifies two major trade routes: 1. "the Northern route oases: Turfan, Aksu, Qizil, Kucha, Karashar, and Turfan; 2. the Southern route oases: Kashgar, Yarkand, Khotan, Endere, Niya, and Miran," which both show a deep influence of Gandhāra due to "drapery style, hairdo and anatomical details. Additionally, the fact that stone was scarce resulted in an absence of sculpture made from stone. Stucco, wall paintings and painted wooden panels are all found at different sites (Krishan, 1996, p. 80) (Figures 13, 14, 15).

Of the several sites that have been considered as some of the most important Chinese Buddhist art places are: the Yungang Grottoes (Datong, Shanxi Province, fifth century CE), the

Mogao Caves, Gansu Province, fourth-sixth century CE, the Kizil Caves (Kucha, Xinjiang, third-fifth century CE) and the Miran Frescoes (Southern Xinjiang, third-fourth century CE). These sites indicate how artistic styles were transmitted along the Silk Road, and how Gandhāran motifs were incorporated into the development of a new Chinese Sino-Buddhist aesthetic. As Rhie notes, early Chinese Buddhist imagery emerged through Central Asian transmission, where Gandhāran stylistic elements such as drapery patterns, bodily proportion, and halo conventions were adapted rather than directly copied (Rhie, 1999).

#### **4. Artistic Innovation at Dunhuang Mogao Caves: Transforming Gandhāran Inspiration into a New Buddhist Vision**

This part of the search focuses on how the artists at Dunhuang conceived and idealized Gandhāran art. The selected works were visually analyzed and examined side-by-side to generate novel ways of understanding these two certain art styles. Historically and culturally addressing, the focus here is on the development of Dunhuang's artistic identity and how Gandhāran art impacted that identity.

##### **4.1 Dunhuang Buddhist Art**

Historians agree that Gandhāra had a profound influence on the development of Dunhuang culture. Additionally, the Silk Road provided the conduit through which this happened. As a result of the vast amount of influence that Gandhāra culture had on Buddhism, Buddhist imagery is prevalent in many of China's most impressive examples of cave art. For example, in Dunhuang, the early Buddhist statues featuring distinctly Gandhāran traits evolved over time and eventually began to feature more and more elements of Chinese culture (Zuoyi Ba & Zeming Kong, 2024). This process can be likened to an evolutionary journey, wherein the Buddhist art of Gandhāra, developed originally within the boundaries of Gandhāra itself, was transported to Dunhuang, and there it experienced a new type of Buddhist vision.

The artwork of Dunhuang represents a magnificent fusion of diverse cultural influences, blending the spiritual with the sublime into a visual tapestry that embodies both the aesthetic majesty of the Silk Road during its golden era and the richness of the cultural mosaic of the Silk Road during that time. "Dunhuang culture is one of four great cultural systems around the world. It came from the ancient "Central Plain" culture of China. It is the meeting, merging and exchange of Chinese and foreign cultures in Mogao Caves of Dunhuang" (Zuoyi Ba & Zeming Kong, 2024).

Because of its strategic position along the Silk Rout in Gansu Province, China, Dunhuang evolved into a prominent center of Buddhist art and culture. The Mogao Caves of Dunhuang, a system of 492 caves/monasteries, illustrate the substantial creative and cultural interchange that took place there. The caves are famous for their Buddhist paintings and sculptures, which reflect the syncretic nature of the Central Asian and Chinese influences, including those of Gandhāra (Boardman, 1994, pp. 42-44). The Greco-Buddhist style, which is identified by realistic depictions of humans, complex folds of clothing and the incorporation of Hellenistic motifs, was adopted and modified by Chinese artists to create a distinctive hybrid of Indian, Greek and Chinese artistic traditions (Behrendt, 2007, pp. 29-31). "The Mogao Caves are commonly referred to in Europe as either the 'Desert Museum' or 'Wall Library'" (Duan, 1994).

##### **4.2 Impact of the Kushan Empire and Mahayana Buddhism on the Mogao Caves Dunhuang**

Under Kushan rule, there were two significant schools of art in India - the Gandhāra school and the Mathura school flourished parallel. It is also during the Kushan dynasty that the first human representations of Buddha evolved. Another characteristic of the Kushan emperors was their

significant commercial involvement in the Silk Road trade network, connecting China to India and Western Asia. The Kushan Empire vigorously used the Silk Road to disseminate Buddhism to Dunhuang along with the Mahayana sutras and the Gandhāran sculptures. One of the most famous Kushan emperors, Kanishka I, ruled from AD 78 to AD 144 and was known to support both Buddhism and Gandhāran art.

A major aspect of the connection between India and China through Buddhism was the introduction of Mahayana Buddhism, or "the Great Ferry." Through the Silk Road trade route, Mahayana teachings and art traveled to Eastern Asia and had a major impact on the development of Dunhuang Buddhism. The Kushan Empire was instrumental in the transmission of Mahayana Buddhism to Dunhuang, and thus, the art and teachings were able to merge with local traditions in Dunhuang to create the unique "Buddhist Art of Dunhuang."

Cave 275 provides some of the best examples of how the Gandhāran-style modeling system is represented in the Mogao Caves. As previously mentioned, the artistic imagery of Gandhāra greatly influenced the production of early Dunhuang works, specifically cave numbers 268, 272, and 275, which are currently believed to be among the earliest Mogao Grottoes based upon archaeological research. Juliano's "Reflections on Early Dunhuang Caves: Textiles, Thrones, and Crowns" presents ample evidence of the direct impacts of Gandhāran Buddhist art on Mogao cave art as depicted in cave 275. This visual schema of the art in cave 275 was clearly created using the Gandhāran relief example (Figure 16) in the Government Art Gallery (acc.572) in Chandigarh of a seated cross-legged Maitreya flanked by two attendant figures, produced sometime between the 3rd and 4th centuries (Juliano, 2021, p. 254).

In addition to the above exemplar from the Kushan period is another pattern of Gandhāra art is the standing Bodhisattva with Human-Figure Necklace (Figure 18, left). Also in the same manner, we find a more developed and altered style of Chinese Buddhist art imagery, in a silk painting titled 'Sacred Buddhist Images from Dunhuang' (Figure 18, right) from the golden age of the Tang Dynasty. A cross-legged bodhisattva sits on a dragon throne and is wearing an intricately designed monster-headed necklace over a necklet. The necklace and necklet are similar to those depicted in 2nd- or 3rd-century ornaments of Gandhāran statues (Figure 18, left). The artist used not only Gandhāra but also local Chinese styles (6th century) to produce this work, which is the bodhisattva's fiery aura, with four pairs of celestial musicians surrounding him and a small stupa atop his head. The artist when did the silk painting, utilized visual correspondence to unite the two artistic styles; the winged figures of the necklace recall the celestial musicians who have flying scarves facing each other (Figure 19). The artist added a round face and a reposeful pose to a plump body, typical of modern Tang sculpture (SmartHistory, n.d.).

### 4.3 Gandhāra to Dunhuang: A Comparative Visual Analysis

This analysis highlights the necessity of approaching Buddhist art as a dynamic outcome of cultural exchange, in which motifs and stylistic conventions were not mechanically replicated but continually transformed and reinterpreted. Owing to its exceptional aesthetic refinement and its embodiment of the central Buddhist virtues of compassion and selflessness, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Padmapāṇi)—revered in China as Guanyin—serves as a primary focus of this study, alongside the King Śibi Jātaka, one of the most significant narrative exemplars, selected here to trace the evolutionary trajectory of Buddhist art from Gandhāra to Dunhuang.

#### 4.3.1 Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara/ Padmapani.

This is also an excellent case of Mahayana Buddhist artistic current. Avalokiteshvara Imagery was first created in Gandhāra and then travelled along with a Silk Road region and then into China where it transformed into Guanyin by adopting local Chinese artistic styles. Table 1 provides the details of Iconographic and Artistic Continuities and Transformations (see figures 25,26, 27, 28 corresponding to table 1)

#### 4.3.2 Narrative Style – Jatakas.

In Gandhāran art the use of the narrative style is based on the cycle of stories relating to the life of the historical Buddha. Most of these stories are depicted in the relief sculptures and they have many repeating themes and motifs; however, the influence of the Graeco-Roman art styles can be seen throughout the designs of these sculptures. Depictions of the Buddha's "previous births," known as jatakas, are another important aspect of the narrative style used in Gandhāran art. These Gandharan conceptual depictions provide an excellent means for the artists at Dunhuang to express their imagination and skill. One example of the transmission of ideas in art is the image of the King Sivi (Śibi) Jataka, which is one of the most well-known Buddhist art narratives depicting the story of King Sivi who sacrificed himself to save a dove. The theme of "self-sacrifice and past incarnations" of the Buddha is an idea that has been repeated and inspiring to the artists at Dunhuang.

The story of the King Sivi Jataka has been commonly depicted through Gandhāran art using comprehensive scenes of the king providing his own flesh to save a dove. These scenes reflect the compassion and selflessness that are two of the fundamental virtues of Buddhism (Figure 20). Being depicted in the art of Gandhāra, this Jataka story was included in the art of Dunhuang (Figure 21, Cave 254) and provides evidence of the continued transmission of the Gandhāran artistic and narrative tradition to China, and how it was adopted and evolved into the unique artistic traditions of China.

##### 4.3.2.1 In Terms of Artistic Style and Medium.

Gandhāra: The human figure in Gandhāra style jataka is seen in a pure Gandhāran established style; the typical media used for creating the intricate reliefs and sculptures is Schist stone. The Gandhāran style has been greatly influenced by the Greco-Roman art technique and as such the figures have been represented in a more naturalistic and three-dimensional manner using accurate details of drapery and anatomy. Also, the reliefs and sculptures are very vivid, expressive and realistic and hence appeal to the imaginative aspects of those worshipping at the stupas or shrines (Figure 20).

Dunhuang: Gandhāran style narrative panels of art also have their equivalent in the narrative sequences illustrated in the Dunhuang murals. There are a number of paintings illustrating the tale of King Śibi (who sacrifices his body) found in the Dunhuang caves. A painting of 122.5 × 164 cm depicting this Jataka is present in Mogao Cave No. 254 of the Northern Wei Dynasty (IGNCA, n.d.). This mural in cave 254 primarily utilizes an earthy palette of blues and greens and various muted and vibrant color combinations (Figures 21 & 22). The depictions of the figures utilize a stylized method of representation; long and slender forms and flowing robes, which are characteristic of both the Central Asian and Chinese Buddhist art traditions. The mural format allows for the telling of a complete and elaborate story.

##### 4.3.2.2 The Elaboration of the Lives of Buddha in the Form of a Theatrical Representation of Figures

Both the Gandhāran art and the Dunhuang image of the Śibi Jataka have a similar emphasis on the representation of the figures in terms of a theatrical or dramatic manner through the use of rhythmic

movement. This theatrical or dramatic representation is borrowed from the Hellenistic relief sculptures such as the Gigantomachy frieze from the Great Altar at Pergamon (circa 2nd century BCE) (see Figure 23). This Hellenistic style of sculpture is known for the dramatic poses of the figures, the intensity of their facial expressions and the intricacy of their drapery, all of which were characteristic of the Hellenistic approach to sculpture.

This dramatic or theatrical style is found in Gandhāran art in the dynamic poses of the figures and the fluidity of the drapery of the figures. Likewise, in the Dunhuang mural, the arrangement of the figures has an impression of motion, and in fact appear to be flowing or dancing like figures in the composition of the mural, especially the center figure of King Sivi (See Figure 24) convey a sense of dramatic or narrative movement and spiritual significance. Overall, the theatrical quality of the scene is demonstrated in the body movements of the figures in the mural that demonstrates an evolutionary process from the Hellenistic relief panels that affected Gandhāran style relief imagery to Dunhuang's representation of the figures.

#### 4.3.2.3 Evolution of Artistic Style

China did not receive Buddhism as an imposed system; instead, it assimilated and reformulated the tradition in accordance with its own social and political imperatives; therefore, Buddhist art underwent an evolutionary process. During the Han and Jin Dynasties, the cultural and artistic development in China was heavily influenced by Taoism and Confucianism and is reflected in the murals found in the tombs of the Wei and Jin Dynasties located within the Hexi Corridor. These murals represented the foundational base of Chinese art and culture that could support the adoption of the Buddhist ideology that had been brought from the Western Regions of Asia and which continued to move steadily eastward along the "Silk Road" (Duan, 1994).

The Śibi Jataka is a representation of the artistic style that emerged during the period of the Northern Dynasties, which represents an initial phase of the localization of Buddhism and increasing Sinicization of Buddhism in China. The murals, sculptures, and architectural elements in the oldest caves of Dunhuang reflect the major characteristics of Buddhist art from the Western Regions of Asia, including the high nose, large eyes, long skirt, and muscular body. Additionally, the murals primarily utilized the Western Regions' stereoscopic blending techniques, reflecting a simple and serious style. The reform of Emperor Xiaowen of Northern Wei Dynasty that integrated the Chinese style into the art of Dunhuang were also important to develop a new artistic style. The Śibi Jataka's taller and longer-limbed bodies, and the movement and energy in the figures, created a new type of art (Zhang, 2023). The Mogao paintings incorporated ancient Chinese mythological ideas to produce vibrant flying figures known as *apsaras* or "Feitian" (Figure 22), as well as dynamic floating clouds.

## 5. Conclusion

"Dunhuang Art is both an Inter-Cultural and Intra-Cultural Development" (Duan, 1994). However, Dunhuang artists did not merely imitate Gandhāran artistic styles, their skilled combination of foreign elements with Chinese artistic conventions resulted in an idiosyncratic and innovative visual language. The integration of Chinese techniques (such as rich colors and elaborate design) allowed the Gandhāran influence to be localized and led to the creation of a unique artistic Style.

Gandhāran elements in Dunhuang's art demonstrate the important part the Silk Road played in facilitating cross-cultural exchange. As a conduit for the transfer of ideas (artistic styles) between cultures; the Silk Road was instrumental in the interaction between Gandhāran and Chinese artists in Dunhuang (Whitfield & Whitfield, 2015, pp. 40–43).

**Table 1**

Iconographic and Artistic Continuities and Transformations: Gandhāran Avalokiteśvara (2nd–4th c. CE) and Dunhuang Representations (Mogao Cave 57 and Tang Silk Paintings from Dunhuang, 7th–8th c. CE)

| Iconographic / Artistic Feature             | Gandhāran Avalokiteśvara (Peshawar and Swat Valley, 2nd–4th c. CE)   | Dunhuang Avalokiteśvara / Guanyin (Cave 57, Early Tang, 618–704 CE & Tang Silk Paintings from Dunhuang) | Nature of Influence  |
|---|--|---|--|
| Amitabha Effigy in Crown                    | Small seated Buddha embedded in crown/headdress — defining iconographic marker in Peshawar/Swat schist sculptures (occasional in earlier examples) | Small seated Amitabha clearly visible in elaborate golden crown (Cave 57, 618–704 CE)                   | Early Iconographic Formation in Gandhāra → Systematization through Indian and Central Asian Mahāyāna → Tang Codification |
| Elaborate Jeweled Crown                     | Jeweled diadem derived from Hellenistic stephane and royal portraiture conventions   | Highly ornate golden crown with pendant jewels and decorative hanging elements                          | Direct inheritance — with Chinese elaboration  |
| Multiple Necklaces & Chest Ornaments        | Heavy beaded necklaces and chest jewelry — royal Bodhisattva ornamentation convention  | Multiple layered golden necklaces and pectoral ornaments  | Direct inheritance — royal ornament convention fully preserved with Chinese elements                                     |
| Flowing Shawl / Drapery ( <i>Uttariya</i> ) | Shawl draped over shoulder rendered with Greco-Roman naturalistic fold treatment   | Flowing white robes with draped shawl — folds now linearized in Chinese brush style                     | Transformed inheritance — Gandhāran drapery reinterpreted through Chinese linear aesthetic                               |
| Soft Idealized Facial Modeling              | Hellenistic-influenced soft facial modeling — especially in Swat Valley stucco tradition (Hadda)   | Extraordinarily soft rounded facial modeling — known as 'Most Beautiful Bodhisattva'                    | Transformed inheritance — via Swat stucco → Hadda → Central Asia → Dunhuang  |
| Circular Halo ( <i>Prabhamandala</i> )      | Circular head halo — derived from both Indian and Hellenistic solar deity conventions  | Large circular blue halo behind the head  | Direct inheritance — halo convention fully preserved   |

|                                |  |  |  |
|--------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Downward<br>Compassionate Gaze | Eyes cast slightly downward — expressing compassionate attention to devotees                                   | Eyes cast gently downward in same compassionate expression                             | Direct inheritance — devotional gesture fully preserved                                    |
| Lotus Attribute<br>(Padma)     | Lotus stem held upright in hand — earliest defining attribute of Padmapani Avalokiteshvara in Gandhāran schist | Lotus or water vessel held in hand — Padmapani convention preserved                    | Direct inheritance — Padmapani attribute preserved through entire transmission             |
| Flying Scarves /<br>Ribbons    | No flying Ribbons  | Flowing ribbons and celestial scarves (tianyī) characteristic of Dunhuang Bodhisattvas | Transformed inheritance — Gandhāran draped shawl reinterpreted as flying celestial scarves |
| Contrapposto / Body<br>Pose    | Weight-shift stance derived from Hellenistic Polykleitan canon — relaxed naturalistic posture                  | Slight body turn and weight shift retained — gradually replaced by Chinese frontality  | Partially inherited — Greek contrapposto softened into Chinese aesthetic                   |
| Triadic Composition            | Avalokiteshvara flanking central Buddha — standard Gandhāran triadic sculptural arrangement                    | Avalokiteshvara flanking Amitabha Buddha in Pure Land compositions at Dunhuang         | Direct inheritance — triadic compositional grammar fully preserved                         |
| Material & Technique           | Three-dimensional schist and stucco sculpture.   | Wall painting in mineral pigments — two-dimensional pictorial format                   | Transformed — 3D sculptural tradition translated into 2D pictorial format via Central Asia |

**Source:** Compiled by author based on Gandhāran schist and metal sculptures, Dunhuang Mogao Cave 57 mural (Dunhuang Research Academy), Tang silk painting from Stein Collection British Museum.



*Figure 1.* Map of Gandhāra.

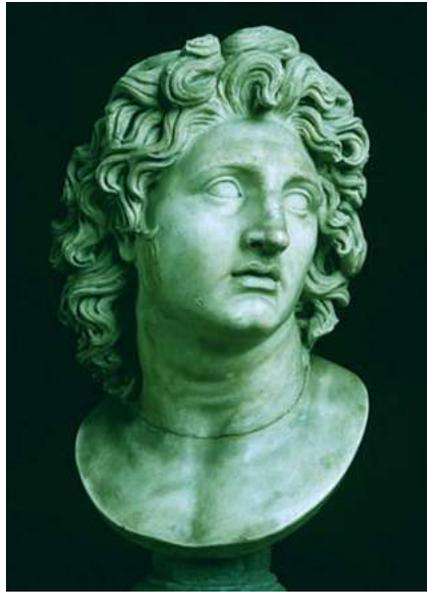
*Source:* Asia Society.



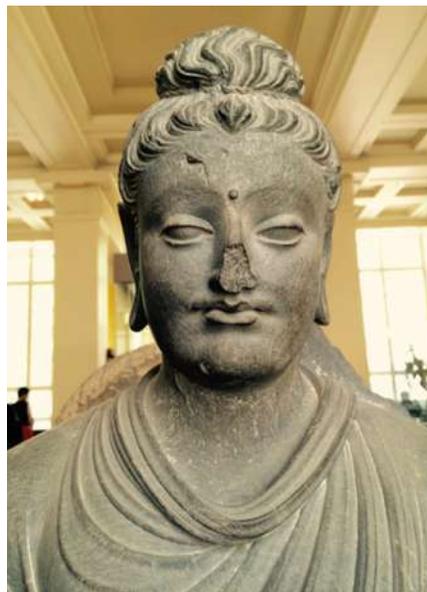
*Figure 2.* Gold coin dating to c. 120 CE depicting King Kanishka I in Kushan attire, with flames emerging from his shoulders and a sacrificial altar, bearing the Greek legend “King of Kings, Kanishka the Kushan.”

The reverse shows a standing Buddha in Greek costume performing the abhaya mudrā, with the Greek inscription BOΔΔΟ (Boddo).

*Source:* British Museum.



**Figure 3.** Marble portrait bust of a Hellenistic ruler, Roman copy after a Greek original of the 4th century BCE, illustrating idealised naturalism and dynamic hair treatment characteristic of Hellenistic portraiture.  
**Source:** British Museum.



**Figure 4.** Gandhāran Buddha displaying Hellenistic stylistic influences, illustrating the synthesis of Greco-Roman naturalism and Buddhist iconography in the Gandhāra region.  
**Source:** After Dokras (2023).



*Figure 5.* Early depiction of the Buddha from the Gandhāra region, illustrating the formative stage of anthropomorphic Buddhist imagery under Hellenistic influence.

*Source:* After “Answers for Milinda” (2009).



*Figure 6.* Slate stone relief depicting the Birth of the Buddha, Gandhāra region, c. 3rd century CE.

*Source:* University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections.



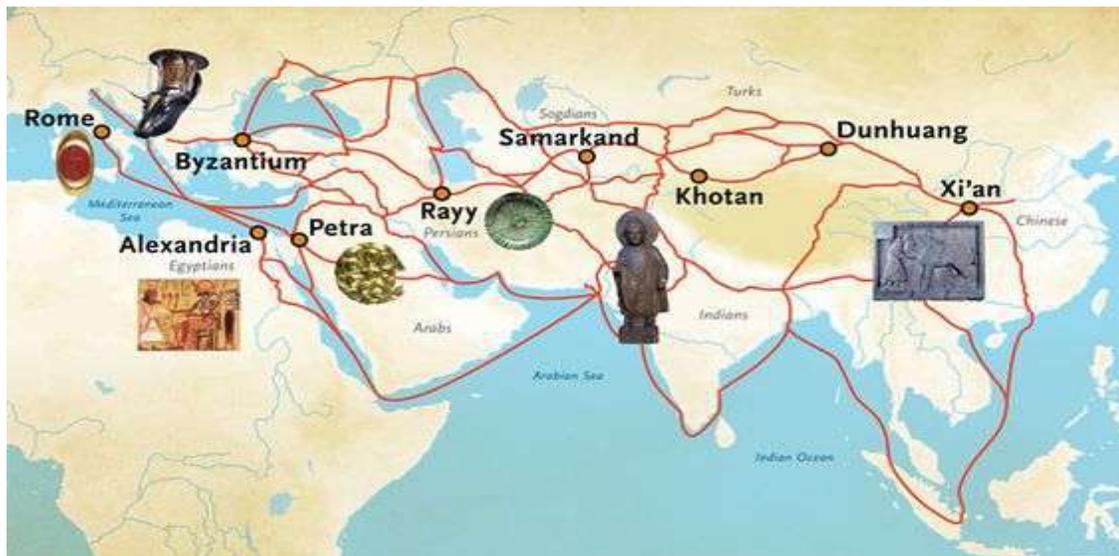
**Figure 7.** Grey schist relief depicting the Miracles at Śrāvastī, Gandhāra region, from Sahri Bahlol, 3rd century CE. Peshawar Museum, inv. no. 1527.

**Source:** After Kurita (2003).

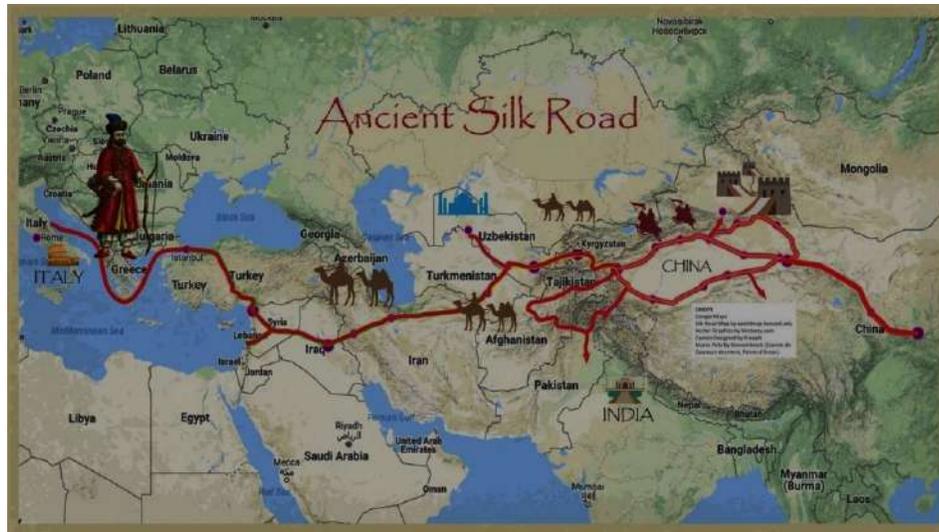


**Figure 8.** Buddha statue in the Gandhāra style, c. 2nd century CE. National Museum, New Delhi, India.

**Source:** Encyclopaedia Britannica.



**Figure 9.** Schematic map illustrating major Silk Road routes and centres of cultural exchange connecting the Mediterranean world, Central Asia, Gandhāra, and China, including key sites such as Alexandria, Samarkand, Khotan, and Dunhuang.



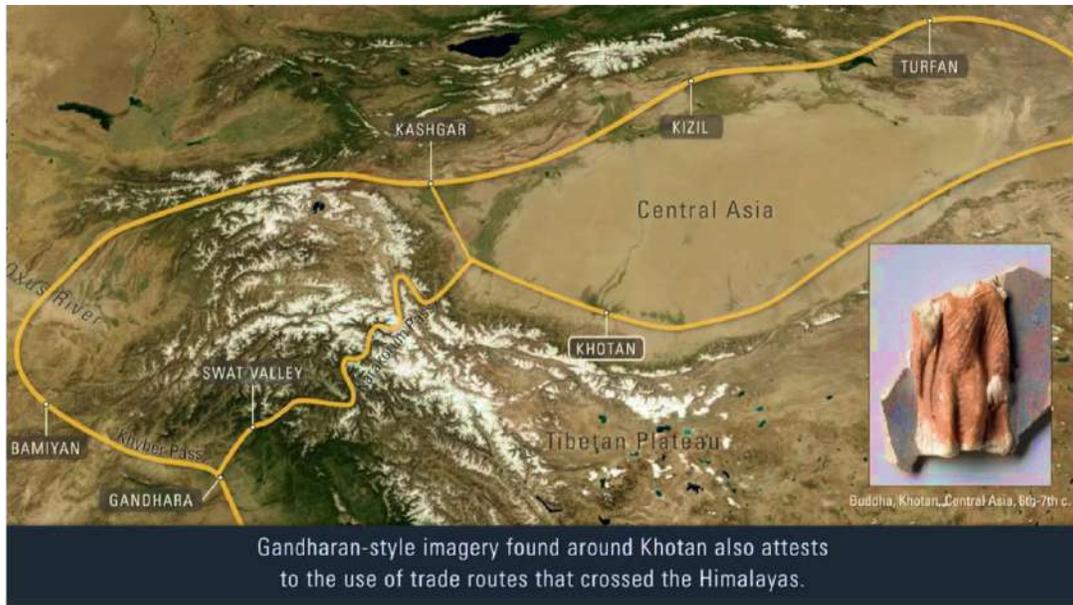
**Figure 10.** Schematic map of the ancient Silk Road illustrating major routes linking the Mediterranean world, Central Asia, and China.

*Source:* Map compiled by the author.



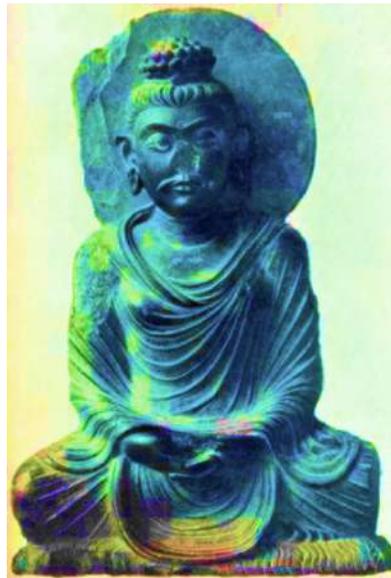
**Figure 11.** Xuanzang with an attendant, hanging scroll, 14th century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

*Source:* The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



**Figure 12.** Schematic representation of the Silk Road as a conduit for the transmission of Buddhist art from Gandhāra through Central Asia to China.

**Source:** Diagram compiled by the author.



**Figure 13.** Seated Buddha figure carved in schist, Gandhāra region, c. 1st–2nd century CE, illustrating early anthropomorphic representation influenced by Greco-Roman naturalism.

**Source:** National Museum of Asian Art (Smithsonian Institution).



**Figure 14.** Scene from the Vessantara Jātaka, mural painting, Miran site, c. 1st–2nd century CE, demonstrating early Central Asian adaptation of Gandhāran narrative and figural conventions.

**Source:** National Museum, New Delhi.



**Figure 15.** Fragmentary mural painting from Miran depicting donor figures adorned with jewellery and patterned garments, c. 1st–2nd century CE, reflecting Gandhāran stylistic influence in Central Asian Buddhist art.

**Source:** National Museum, New Delhi.



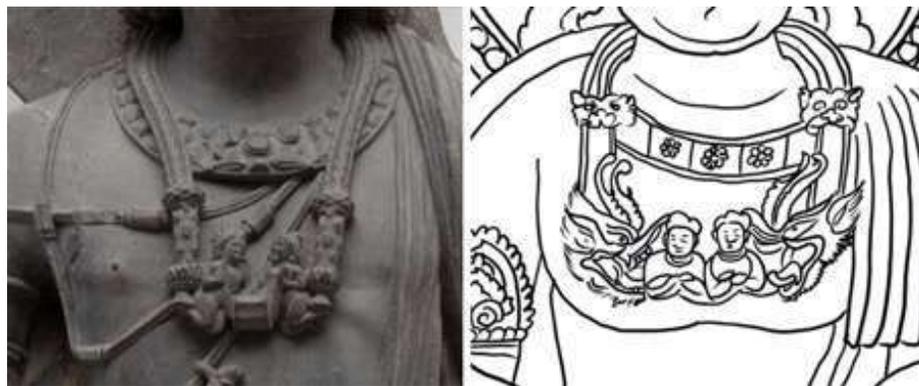
**Figure 16.** Gandhāran stele depicting a Buddhist subject, stone relief, Gandhāra region. Chandigarh Government Museum and Art Gallery, acc. no. 572. Photograph courtesy of Christian Luczanits.



**Figure 17.** Mogao Cave 275: niches on the south wall (top) and north wall (bottom) depicting cross-ankle Maitreya figures seated on thrones with triangular backs and attended by lions, Northern L



**Figure 18.** Left: Standing bodhisattva wearing a human-figure necklace, phyllite sculpture, Gandhāra region, Kushan period (2nd–3rd century CE). Art Institute of Chicago. Right: Seated bodhisattva on a dragon throne, hanging scroll from the Library Cave (Cave 17), Mogao Grottoes, Dunhuang, Tang dynasty (7th–8th century CE). Stein collection (Ch.xxii.0023). National Museum, New Delhi.



**Figure 19.** Detail of necklace motif. Left: Detail from a standing bodhisattva wearing a human-figure necklace, phyllite sculpture, Gandhāra region, Kushan period (2nd–3rd century CE), Art Institute of Chicago. Right: Detail of a seated bodhisattva image, line drawing and theoretical restoration by the author, based on Dunhuang silk painting traditions.



*Figure 20.* Relief depicting the King Sivi (Śibi) Jātaka, Gandhāra region, c. 2nd–3rd century CE, showing the bodhisattva-king offering his flesh to ransom a dove from a hawk. Grey schist. British Museum, Department of Asia, Room G33.



*Figure 21.* Mural depicting the King Sivi (Śibi) Jātaka on the north wall of Mogao Cave 254, Dunhuang, Northern Wei dynasty (439–534 CE).



**Figure 22.** Detail of a celestial being (apsara, Chinese: feitian), depicted as a flying female deva in Buddhist mural painting from Dunhuang.



**Figure 23.** West frieze of the Pergamon Altar depicting the Gigantomachy, with figures of Nereus, Doris, a Giant, and Oceanus, Hellenistic Greek relief sculpture, 2nd century BCE.



**Figure 24.** Author's digital outline drawing based on the King Sivi (Śibi) Jātaka mural from Mogao Cave 254, Dunhuang, highlighting rhythmic movement and theatrical figural arrangement.



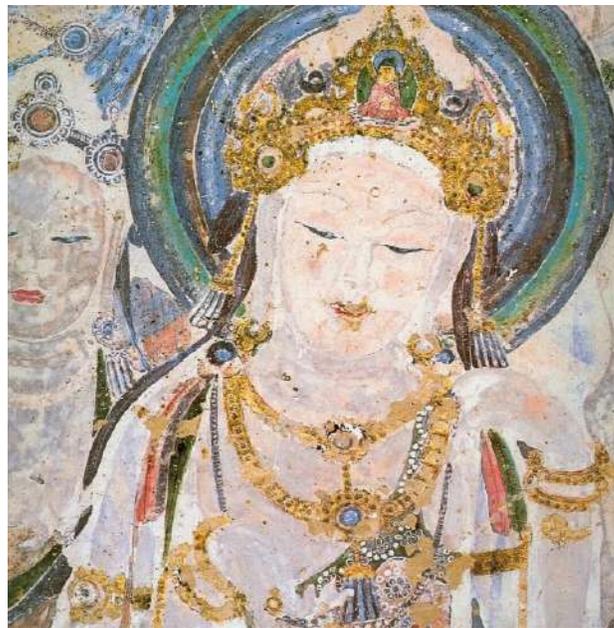
**Figure 25.** Avalokiteshvara Padmapani (showing Padma prominently). 7th century. Bronze inlaid with silver and copper, 22.2 cm × 14.6 cm × 10.5 cm. Swat Valley, Pakistan. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Retrieved from <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39346>



**Figure 26 a.** Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Gandhāra, 4th century. Schist, 210 cm. Private collection, Switzerland Courtesy of the collector. Image reproduced from Reflections on the Gandhāra Bodhisattva Images, by P. Pal.



*Figure 26 b.* Details of Amitabha Buddha motif in the crown, Gandhāran style jewelry, Halo and Robe



**Figure 27.** Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin) showing details of Amitabha in crown motif, jewelry and Halo, Mogao Cave, Dunhuang. Early Tang dynasty (7th century). Wall mural, mineral pigments on plaster. Dunhuang, Gansu Province, China. Courtesy of Dunhuang Research Academy.



**Figure 28.** Avalokitesvara (beautiful flowing ribbons are visible). Tang dynasty, second half of the 9th century A.D. Ink and colors on silk, H. 74.7 cm; W. 55.5 cm. British Museum, Stein Collection (Painting 21, Ch. XXXVI.001). Image reproduced from *The Art of Central Asia II: The Stein Collection in the British Museum* (Vol. 2), by R. Whitfield, 1983. Retrieved from [https://idp.bl.uk/references/Whitfield\\_1983/](https://idp.bl.uk/references/Whitfield_1983/)

### Author

<sup>1\*</sup> PhD Scholar, Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, Shanghai University, Shanghai, China. Email: [irummalikfineart@gmail.com](mailto:irummalikfineart@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Professor, Department of Visual Arts, University of California, San Diego, USA. Email: [kshen@ucsd.edu](mailto:kshen@ucsd.edu)

### References

- Ali, I. (2008). Peshawar Museum sculpture book. Peshawar, Pakistan: University of Peshawar.
- Ali, I., & Qazi, M. N. (2008). Life story of Buddha. Mansehra, Pakistan: Peshawar Museum & Hazara University.
- Art Institute of Chicago. (n.d.). Standing bodhisattva with human-figure necklace (phyllite sculpture, Gandhāra, Kushan period). Chicago, IL: Art Institute of Chicago.

- Asia Society. (n.d.). Map of Gandhāra. Retrieved from <https://sites.asiasociety.org/Gandhāra/maps/>
- Badshah Sardar, & Saeed, T. (2020). Cultural dialogue between East and West civilizations through the Silk Road and the role of Gandhāra as a melting pot. *Quarterly Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, 68(4), 20–30.
- Behrendt, K. A. (2007). *The art of Gandhāra in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York, NY: Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Blair, S. (2009). Answers for Milinda: Hellenistic influence on the development of Gandhāran Buddhism. *TCNJ Journal of Student Scholarship*, 11, 1–11.
- Boardman, J. (1994). *The diffusion of classical art in antiquity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- British Museum. (n.d.). Marble portrait bust of a Hellenistic ruler (Roman copy after a Greek original, 4th century BCE). London, UK: British Museum.
- British Museum. (n.d.). Relief of the King Sivi (Śibi) Jātaka, Gandhāra, 2nd–3rd century CE. London, UK: British Museum.
- Dokras, U. (2023). A Greek Buddha: Hellenistic influences and the image of the Buddha. INAC. Retrieved from [https://www.academia.edu/97208852/A\\_Greek\\_Buddha](https://www.academia.edu/97208852/A_Greek_Buddha)
- Duan, W. (1994). *Dunhuang art: Through the eyes of Duan Wenjie*. New Delhi, India: Abhinav Publications.
- Dunhuang Academy. (n.d.). Mogao Cave 254, Northern Wei dynasty (439–534 CE): Mural paintings. Dunhuang, China: Dunhuang Academy.
- Dunhuang Academy. (n.d.). Mogao Cave 275, Northern Liang dynasty (420–439 CE): Stucco sculptures with polychromy. Dunhuang, China: Dunhuang Academy.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). Gandhāra art. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/facts/Gandhāra-art>
- Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). Xuanzang. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Xuanzang>
- Farooq Swati. (1997). Gandhāra and the Indus-Oxus school of Buddhist art. *South Asian Archaeology*, 13, 1–15.
- Fong, W. (1992). *Beyond representation: Chinese painting and calligraphy, 8th–14th century*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Galli, M. (2011). Hellenistic court imagery in the early Buddhist art of Gandhāra. *Ancient Civilizations from Scythia to Siberia*, 17, 279–329.
- IGNCA. (n.d.). Some aspects of Jātaka paintings in Indian and Chinese (Central Asian) art. Retrieved from <https://ignca.gov.in/>
- Juliano, A. (2021). *Visualizing Dunhuang: Seeing, studying, and conserving the caves*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Krishan, Y. (1996). *The Buddha image: Its origin and development*. Mumbai, India: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.
- Li, Y. (2024). Juqu Mengxun's Buddhism-politics system drawing on the Kushan Empire: A case study of Mogao Cave 275 in Dunhuang. *Asian Culture and History*, 16(1), 31–45. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ach.v16n1p31>
- Luczanits, C. (n.d.). Gandhāran art in its Buddhist context [E-publication]. Retrieved from <https://www.cvaonline.org/XDB/DMS/>
- Magnata, S. (2024). The transmission of Buddhist imagery throughout Asia. Retrieved from <https://www.academia.edu/>

- National Museum of Asian Art. (n.d.). Seated Buddha, Gandhāra, schist sculpture (1st–2nd century CE). Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.
- National Museum, New Delhi. (n.d.). Seated bodhisattva on a dragon throne from Mogao Cave 17 (Stein collection, Ch.xxii.0023), Tang dynasty (7th–8th century CE). New Delhi, India: National Museum.
- Neelis, J. (2011). *Early Buddhist transmission and trade networks*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.
- Rhie, M. M. (1999). *Early Buddhist art of China and Central Asia (Vol. 1)*. Brill.
- Salomon, R. (1999). *Ancient Buddhist scrolls from Gandhāra*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- SmartHistory. (n.d.). A silk painting of sacred Buddhist images from Dunhuang. Retrieved from <https://smarthistory.org/>
- Stewart, A. (2004). *Attalos, Athens, and the Akropolis: The Pergamon Altar in context*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Thapar, R. (2002). *The Penguin history of early India*. New Delhi, India: Penguin Books.
- University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections. (n.d.). Slate stone relief depicting the birth of the Buddha (Gandhāra, 3rd century CE). Retrieved from <https://digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/digital/collection/ic/id/7266/>
- Whitfield, R., & Whitfield, S. (2015). *Cave temples of Mogao: Art and history on the Silk Road*. Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications.
- Xuanzang. (1884). *The great Tang dynasty record of the Western Regions (S. Beal, Trans.)*. London, UK: Trübner & Co.
- Zhang, X. (2023). The Dunhuang caves: Artistic development and social interactions of Chinese Buddhism. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 21, 266–279. <https://doi.org/10.54097/ehss.v21i.14016>
- Zuoyi Ba, & Zeming Kong. (2024). Research on integration based on Dunhuang culture. In Y. Chen, C. Shen, & J. Rak (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Culture, Design and Social Development* (pp. 433–438). Paris, France: Atlantis Press. [https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-222-4\\_54](https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-222-4_54)
- Zwalf, W. (1996). *A catalogue of the Gandhāra sculpture in the British Museum*. London, UK: British Museum Press.