



ART IN IRAN VI. PRE-ISLAMIC EASTERN IRAN AND CENTRAL ASIA

ART IN IRAN, History of

vi. Pre-Islamic Eastern Iran And Central Asia

Geographical and historical background. Eastern Iran and Central Asia comprise that vast tract of land, referred to as Turkestan, that extends from the Caspian Sea to the Kansu province of China. The present political boundaries of Central Asia embraces Afghanistan north of the Hindu Kush, the Soviet Central Asian republics that comprise Russian or Western Turkestan ([Figure 48](#)), and the Chinese province of Sinkiang (Serindia) that corresponds with Chinese or Eastern Turkestan. Watered by the Āmū Daryā (Oxus) and the Syr Daryā (Jaxartes) rivers and their tributaries, the cultivated valleys of northern Afghanistan and Russian Turkestan are surrounded by desert wastes, steppes, and mountains.

Although archeological investigation has revealed the existence of sedentary communities in eastern Iran and Transoxiana from the Neolithic period (see under Archaeology, Pre Islamic Central Asia), monumental works of art of the pre-Islamic age are there evidenced only from the early medieval period that corresponds with the Parthian and Sasanian dynasties in Iran. The



development of the early medieval Central Asian civilization and its traditions of monumental art was evidently directly related to the establishment of the Silk Route that connected China to India and the West (Figure 47). Sustained by the transcontinental traffic and inspired by the cultures of Buddhist India, pre-Islamic Iran, the Greco Roman West and early medieval China, the sedentary civilizations of Central Asia underwent a period of rapid development from the first century A.D. until the Arab conquest in the eighth. From Tunhuang in Kansu province the trade routes followed either the northern or the southern rim of the Taklamakan desert to join again east of the Pamirs at Kashgar. From Kashgar one route followed the middle course of the Oxus to Marv where it joined a second principal route from Kashgar that passed through the Ferghana valley and Transoxiana. From Marv the route continued westward across the Iranian Plateau to Syria and the Mediterranean world.

The pre-Islamic civilizations of eastern Iran and Central Asia are identified with at least five Middle Iranian linguistic groups (Sogdian, Khotanese Saka, Parthian, Choresmian, and Bactrian) and with the Tokharian language current in Kucha and related centers in Serindia. Uighur Turkish found currency in the easternmost oases of Serindia only from the eighth century A.D. Sogdian which replaced Khotanese Saka as the lingua franca of early medieval Central Asia, was the language of Sogdiana in the basins of the Zarafšān and Kashak (Kāšak) rivers in Transoxiana. Parthian, Choresmian and Bactrian constituted the native speeches respectively of Parthia, which corresponds with the province of Khorasan in Iran, Choresmia (Kvārezm) in the lower Oxus, and Bactria or Kushan Tokārestān on both banks of the Oxus along its middle course. Thus, the geographical distribution of the east Iranian linguistic groups follows roughly the limits of the easternmost provinces of the Achaemenid empire of the fifth century B.C. East Iranian Saka dialects were known in Khotan, Tumšūq, and Murtuq in Serindia. The occupation of the Greco Bactrian kingdom by Saka tribes and the migration of the Yüeh chih hordes from the northeastern borders of China to Bactria familiarized the Chinese with the commercial potential of the fertile lands of the Oxus. With the establishment of Chinese diplomatic relations with Parthia, Chinese silks were introduced in the West and Western and Indian influences were transmitted to China. In the first century A.D., the Yüeh chih expanded beyond the Oxus into Transoxiana and India, creating the Kushan empire, the Kūšānšahr, which reached its apogee under Kanishka in the early part of the second century A.D., but became subject to the Sasanian king Šāpūr I in A.D. 241. The



political role of the Kushans in Tokārestān was gradually assumed by the Huns, the Chionites of Ammianus Marcellinus, and, with the decline of Chinese power in Central Asia in the 3rd century was coupled with the penetration of the Tarim basin by the White Huns, or Hephthalites. After the defeat of the Hephthalites by the combined forces of Sasanian Iran and the Western Turks in A.D. 557, the eastern portion of Hephthalite lands fell under Turkish control. In the Far East the Chinese eventually subjugated Serindia but lost it to the Arabs in A.D. 751.

Eastern Iran and Bactria. The Hellenistic artistic tradition that was transplanted in the Orient in the wake of Alexander's conquest of the Achaemenid empire provides the common denominator in the earliest monumental works of art from eastern Iran and Bactria. The Hellenistic contribution to Parthian art of the first century B.C., a period when the Arsacids had made their greatest territorial gains in Western Asia, is documented in the material remains from the early Parthian capital at Nisa, near Ashkhabad, (Ešqābād) in Soviet Turkmenistan. Hellenistic marble sculpture, royal images in painted clay and the carved ivory rhyta from Nisa testify to the prevalence of Hellenistic artistic patterns in the east Iranian artistic workshops (Plate XIII). The survival of the Greco Iranian artistic tradition in the latest art of the Parthians in eastern Iran, is evidenced by the Hellenistic iconography and style of some of the figures depicted in the murals from the palace at Kūh e Kāvāja, in Sīstān.

The earliest monumental works of art from Bactria are exemplified by marble sculptures from the Hellenistic city at Ai Khanum (Āy Kānom) situated near the confluence of the Oxus and Kokcha rivers in northern Afghanistan. The Greco Bactrian artistic style survived the nomadic occupation of Bactria around 100 B.C., and provided the basis for the art of the early Kushan rulers of Bactria. The murals and painted clay sculpture from the early Kushan palace at Khalchayan (Kālčayān) near Denau, in southern Uzbekistan, combine the idiom of Greco Bactrian art with symbols of dynastic legitimacy that pervade Kushan art from other parts of Kūšānšahr (Plate XIV). The splay kneed posture of the enthroned figure depicted on a terra cotta plaque from Khalchayan, repeats the formula found in royal portraits from the Kushan dynastic shrines at Surkh (Sork) Kotal, in northern Afghanistan, and at Mathurā, in India. Similar symbols of dynastic legitimacy are found in Parthian art of the first and second centuries (cf. portraits from Šamī, Bard e Nešānda, and Hatra).



With the establishment of the Buddhist religion in Kushan Bactria, Indian artistic canons were introduced in the monumental arts of Tokārestān. Incipient traces of Buddhist art are found in the busts of musicians from the alabaster relief from Airtam, Near Termed (2nd 3rd cents. A.D.), in stone reliefs and murals from Termed and nearby Kara tepe (2nd 4th cents. A.D.), and in the painted stucco portraits of donors from Dālverzīn tepe, near Denau (2nd 4th cents. A. D.). The principal source for the transmission of early Buddhist art to Serindia was Gandhara, in southern Afghanistan. Situated south of the Hindu Kush at the intersection of the roads to the Oxus, India, and Serindia, the Gandharan school is identified with schist and stucco sculpture restricted to Buddhist themes and an Indian iconography expressed according to the idiom of Greco Bactrian art. Gandharan art of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D., exemplified by stucco sculpture from Hadda which manifests the influence of Roman art and a tendency towards abstraction, provided the ultimate model for the Buddhist clay images of Serindia. Such clay sculpture was molded around a wooden armature and completed by the application of a layer of plaster that was gilded or coated with paint.

This method was modified in the execution of the gigantic Buddha images from Bāmīān. The 53 m and 35 m Buddhas from Bāmīān, northeast of Kabul, in turn served as prototypes for the colossal Buddha images in the rock cut shrines of Serindia and China. The plastered rock cut niches of the Bāmīān Buddhas were decorated with murals that display varying degrees of Greco Bactrian, Indian, and Sasanian influences. The hieratic compositions, rigid disposition of flying ribbons, ornaments, and royal crowns depicted in the murals from the niche of the 35 m Buddha, follow Sasanian stylistic and iconographic patterns of the sixth and seventh centuries. A similar style is suggested for the Indian style of the murals from the niche of the 53 m Buddha. The Mahāyāna pantheon depicted in the latter murals prevails in the paintings from the Buddhist caves at Kakrak, northeast of Bāmīān, and in the murals and painted clay sculpture from the Buddhist monastery at Fondukistan, southeast of Bāmīān. The graceful curve of the long waisted bodies, the sensuous faces and delicate hand gestures of the images from Fondukistan perpetuate the mannered elegance of the Gupta art of India in this northerly outpost of Indian culture.

The influence of the Buddhist art of Fondukistan, dated to the seventh and eighth centuries, is reflected in the contemporaneous art of northern Tokārestān, exemplified by the murals and clay sculpture from the Buddhist



monastery at Adzhina tepe, near Kurgan Tyube, in southern Tajikistan. The colossal image of a recumbent Buddha (originally 12 m) from this site, recalls the gigantic Buddha image of Bāmīān, noted by the Chinese pilgrim Hsüan tsang in the seventh century, and other large Buddha images uncovered in western Turkestan (from Krasnaya rechka near Frunze, Kuva in Ferghana [Farḡāna], and Marv). The linear and two dimensional style and iconography of the secular themes depicted in the murals from Adzhina tepe, find parallels in the secular murals from Balalyk tepe, in southern Uzbekistan, in the murals from the vault of the 35 m Buddha at Bāmīān, and in the murals from Dālverzīn in northern Afghanistan. The shallow space, linear and flat forms, matted hair and distinctive costume and capes of the male and female figures in these murals distinguish these paintings as products of the seventh century regional school of Tokārestān.

The origins of a distinctive Iranian Islamic culture are to be sought in eastern Iran, particularly Khorasan. During the Islamic conquest the indigenous population had been augmented by Arab settlers. From this mixture of Arab and local groups arose a Persian Islamic culture in both its religious and secular manifestations. The critical role that Khorasan and the adjacent parts of Central Asia had played in the establishment of the ‘Abbasid dynasty also gave the region close ties to Iraq. Even when ‘Abbasid political control over the region declined with the establishment of strong local rulers under the Taherids (206-60/821-73) and Samanids (204-395/819-1005), cultural links to Iraq remained significant. At the same time, however, these dynasties and their successors, the Ghaznavids (367-582/977-1186) also encouraged the development of local traditions. In its formative stages, therefore, the art of eastern Iran combines features reflecting the taste of the ‘Abbasid capital with those of local origin.

K̲v̲ārazm (Choresmia). Pre-Islamic Choresmia witnessed two periods of urbanization that preceded and followed the Sasanian dynasty in Iran. The “classical” phase, also known as “Kang kyo” (K’ang chü of the Chinese sources), refers to the pinnacle of the Choresmian civilization during its first period of urban development. Reflections of Greco Iranian and Greco Bactrian art are found in the realistically proportioned human figures executed in painted clay and terra cotta, and in the illusionistic drapery effects in murals from the “classical” phase of Choresmian art. If the softly rounded contours, robust proportions and large oval face of the terra cotta female figure from the Koʻkrylgan kala necropolis recall ultimately Hellenistic prototypes, the



proportions and facial features of a male ossuary figure from the same site parallel contemporaneous developments in late Parthian art (Plate XV). Regional iconography and dress are combined with Hellenistic illusionistic drapery effects and realistic proportions in the monumental painted sculptures from the “Hall of Kings,” at the Choresmian royal palace at Toprak kala, northeast of Bīrūnī. The murals and clay sculptures from Toprak kala and from the fort at Koʻy krylgan kala, east of Bīrūnī, may be dated on the basis of Choresmian inscriptions from these sites to the end of the first period of Choresmian urbanization. S. P. Tolstov, the director of the Choresmian excavations, believed that the penetration of Choresmia in the third and fourth centuries A.D. contributed to the downfall of the Choresmian towns. However, W. B. Henning has noted that since Toprak kala and Koʻy krylgan kala were doubtless among the towns that were abandoned after the defeat of the Choresmians by the Sasanian king Šāpūr I (A.D. 240–72), during the latter’s first regnal year, the third century A.D. may be regarded as the terminal date for the “classical” phase in Choresmian art. The Choresmian necropolis at Tok kala, near Nukus, has yielded painted alabaster ossuaries dated on the basis of inscriptions to the second period of Choresmian urbanization in the seventh and eighth centuries. Scenes of mourning, depicted in a linear and sketchy style on these ossuaries, follow the conventions adopted in the funerary art of other east Iranian traditions. A painted ash urn from Marv, and a Sogdian mural from Temple II, at Panjikent, offer sixth century antecedents for the formula used for the illustration of the mourning scene on the Choresmian ossuaries.

Sogdiana. The development of the monumental arts of pre-Islamic Sogdiana is limited chronologically to the fifth through the first quarter of the eighth century A.D., when Sogdian merchants acted as principal agents in the promotion of the transcontinental trade along the Silk Route. Sogdian art known primarily from urban centers in Transoxiana, reflects the values and lifestyle of the landed aristocracy (*dehqāns*) and the feudal lords, as well as those of the Sogdian merchants who contributed to the enrichment of the cities.

Wall paintings which decorated the plastered mud brick architecture of the urban centers, constituted the principal medium of artistic expression in Sogdiana. As an economical and dispensable art form, wall paintings found widespread use in Sogdian private residences, palaces and sanctuaries uncovered at the Sogdian capital city of Samarkand, at Panjikent situated 40



miles east of Samarkand, at Varakhsha (Varaḵṣa) in the Bukhara oasis, and at Shahrīstan (Šahrestān) in the easternmost Sogdian principality of Osrūšana. The earliest Sogdian paintings, datable on archeological grounds to the early sixth century, have been uncovered in the northern precincts of a Sogdian public sanctuary, referred to as Temple II, at Panjikent. The presence in these early Sogdian paintings of iconographic and stylistic parallels to the secular painting tradition of Tokārestān is to be expected in the non Buddhist context of Sogdian art. Noteworthy, however, are the reminiscences of the Greco Buddhist conventions of Gandharan art met in the oval, beardless and somewhat idealized male heads and in the treatment of drapery. The Sogdian tradition of painting, like that of Tokārestān, was thus built in part upon conventions developed earlier in the arts of the Kushans, the Parthians, and the Choresmians. But a pressing demand existed for an art that would adequately express the spirit of the new age within the cultural context of non Buddhist Central Asia. This demand resulted in a search for new stylistic and thematic standards and was met in the choice of a linear and two dimensional style in wall painting and in the development of a distinctive artistic idiom for the representation of continuous pictorial narration. The principal contribution of Sogdian painting lies in its exploitation of the potential of these stylistic objectives, and in the development of a richly narrative and locally meaningful thematic repertory.

The earliest Sogdian murals from Panjikent picture the native Sogdian pantheon that included a large number of Iranian deities. The Iranian gods Mithra and Wyšprkr, the goddess Nana of the Sumero Akkadian pantheon, and a funerary cult associated with the royal dynasty have been identified in Sogdian murals and in wood carvings preserved in charred fragments from Panjikent and Shahrīstan. Conclusive identifications are lacking, however, for a large number of religious themes, such as the representation of marine life on a carved clay relief panel (30 x 3 ft) from the portico of Temple II, at Panjikent. The major body of the Sogdian wall paintings was discovered in private residences, where they had a primarily secular function (Figure 49). Scenes of heroic, historic, and popular interest frequently comprise the exclusive ornament of walls of large residential units where they are distributed around a divine image depicted on the wall facing the entrance. By contrast to the hieratic and self contained compositions of religious imagery, heroic and epic cycles are generally depicted as a sequence of episodes in one or more registers of continuous narration (Figure 50). The importance of the epic and historic themes is suggested by their allocation to a medial position



on the walls, the monumental dimensions of the figures and the use of brilliant colors. Legendary themes are distinguished, furthermore, by formal conventions and iconographic formulae that identify them as illustrations of heroic cycles. Like the heroic and secular literature of entertainment, the Sogdian murals were cultivated by professional artists who served the demands and interests of a warlike and aristocratic society.

The heroic legend preserved in the triple register of continuous narration from Panjikent VI:41, represents a rare example of a narrative sequence for which positive identification has been offered. The exploits of the hero depicted in these murals were compared by their excavator A. M. Belenitskiĭ to those of the hero Rostam whose legend is recorded in a Sogdian fragment from Tun huang. Moreover, variations between the Sogdian Rostam fragment and the later Rostam cycle, recorded in Ferdowsi's *Šāh nāma*, suggest the existence in eastern Iran of an elaborate cycle of Rostam legends in pre-Islamic times. With the exception of the Rostam cycle and the *Žoḥḥāk* story from Panjikent I (north wing of ayvān), the content of the innumerable heroic epics depicted in Sogdian painting remains elusive. The local significance and origin of the latter, however, is suggested by the novelty and complexity of the epic cycles. Connections between the names of known heroes and legends familiar from Persian epics are indeed lacking in the one instance where Sogdian inscriptions provide the names of the battling heroes (Panjikent XXII, walls flanking altar of main hall). Legendary figures and heroized individuals are frequently identified by means of specific marks, attributes, or associations that distinguish them from heroes of popular themes and living individuals in historic documentaries. A concern for realistic detail and accuracy characterizes the representations of historic documentaries such as those uncovered in the murals from the Panjikent citadel and from an aristocratic residence at Samarkand. The formula adopted for heroic and historic themes is modified in the illustrations of fables and scenes of daily life (cf. Panjikent VI:41, lowermost register). The latter are depicted synoptically in condensed and independent compositions, restricted to small panels, that may reflect their derivation from book painting.

Serindia. Works of art associated with the Saka tribes that roamed the region east of the Jaxartes and the Pamirs in the first millennium B.C. are limited to animal shaped artifacts that display a greater affinity to the Scythian "Animal Style" of the Eurasian steppe belt than to the subsequent monumental arts of the Saka speaking communities of Serindia. The earliest monumental arts of



the oases of Khotan, Niya, and Mīrān on the southern trade route, display a direct dependence upon Indian culture and Gandharan art of the Kushan period. The representation of episodes from the Buddhist Vessantara Jātaka and the use of Greco Bactrian iconographic and stylistic conventions in the murals from shrine M. V. at Mīrān, suggest a direct link between Gandhara and this early school of Buddhist art in Serindia.

A broader range of artistic influences is found in the monumental arts of the Saka speaking kingdom of Khotan, datable to the seventh and eighth centuries. The hieratic Buddhist images, formulaic rows of Buddhas and laconic panel compositions of Khotanese art were inspired by tantric and Mahāyāna Buddhist literary sources and occasionally by local legends. Despite its debt to the artistic traditions of Gupta India, Tokārestān, China, and Sogdiana, the Khotanese artistic school evolved a distinctive style that left its impact upon the arts of T'ang China and Tibet. The influence of Khotanese art may be seen also in the tantric images in painted clay from Kuva, Ferghana, and in the representation of a frontal four armed goddess and demoniac figures in the Sogdian murals from Shahristan, Osrūšana.

A reduced pantheon limited to Hinayāna Buddhist themes pervades the arts of the majority of oases on the northern trade route. The mold made clay images from Temple B, at Tumšūq combine Gandharan features with the distinctive facial mask that was evolved in the more easterly Serindian schools of Qizil and Šorčuq. Tumšūq was politically part of the Tokharian speaking kingdom of Kucha, which prior to its subjugation by T'ang China in A.D. 647, was a flourishing oasis with a chivalric society dedicated to Hinayāna Buddhism. The extensive series of murals uncovered in Buddhist establishments in the kingdom of Kucha fall within two general stylistic categories. An Indianizing style, represented by the Indian type and relatively complex compositions, may be distinguished from a regional style, referred to as "Indo Iranian" or "Central Asian," characterized by a linear and mannered representation of the human form, flat and ornamentalized background and a cool and exquisite palette (Plate XVI). The standardized human figures in the latter category of murals are provided with white highlights and broad bands of colored accents along the contours that are ultimately derived from the less schematic chiaroscuro effects of Gandharan art. By contrast to the graceful pliant bodies of celestial figures and the inventive compositions used in representations of Jātaka stories (cf. "Cave of the Swordbearers" at Qizil) the secular figures of donors are rigidly frontal and arranged in processions against a flat flower



strewn background. The splay toed posture of the male donors from the “Devil’s Cave” at Qizil (Plate XVII), recalls the posture of the donors in Sogdian murals of the sixth century (cf. northern precinct of Temple II, Panjikent) and ultimately Sasanian prototypes found in the rock reliefs from the reign of Šāpūr I.

The artistic school of Kucha evidently provided the impetus for the development of the more easterly regional workshops of Šorčuq and Qarašahr, on the northern trade route. With the subjugation of Qarašahr by the Chinese in A.D. 668, twenty years after the fall of Kucha, the center of artistic activity in Serindia shifted east to the Turfan oasis. Turfanese art of the eighth and ninth centuries manifests the Chinese palette and style, as well as the Mongoloid facial features that characterize T’ang paintings from the Thousand Buddha Caves at Tun huang, in the Kansu province of China. From the synthesis of Chinese and Serindian artistic conventions, the Turfanese school evolved a regional style that flourished in the Buddhist sites of the ninth century. The subject matter of Turfanese art was considerably expanded with the establishment of the Uighur Turks in A.D. 843 at the Turfanese capital, Kao Ch’ang (Qočo, Qara khoja). Manicheism, Nestorian Christianity, and Mahāyāna Buddhism provided themes for the murals, painted fabrics, and illuminated manuscripts produced in Turfan under Uighur patronage. Turfan, which remained a repository for the pre-Islamic artistic traditions of Central Asia until the eleventh century, served as a source of artistic inspiration not only for the Far East, but also for the arts of the Turkish and early Mongol dynasties of the Islamic West.

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