



KUSHAN DYNASTY IX. ART OF THE KUSHANS

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The term Kushan art refers to a variety of artistic expressions that developed under the rule of the Kushan dynasty during the first three centuries of the Common Era on a territory spreading broadly between north of the [Oxus River](#) and the Gangetic plain in North India. Artistic productions fall mainly into two branches: works in the service of the dynasty and works in the service of religion, principally [Buddhism](#), but also Brahmanism and Jainism. There exist few if any common features between, for instance, statues of rulers from [Khalchayan](#) and a Buddhist relief from [Gandhara](#); in consequence, some scholars might find the expression “art of the Kushan period” more adequate than that of “Kushan art.” Nevertheless, as this discussion hopes to convey, these heterogeneous artistic expressions reflect a common pattern in that they all result from the assimilation and re-elaboration of an eclectic cultural and artistic repertoire.

Dynastic art. The term “dynastic arts” was coined by John Rosenfield and refers to portraits of Kushan rulers, such as those found in the temple of Maṭ (India) and on the obverse of the coins issued by Kushan kings (e.g., Rosenfield, pp. 54-71, 174-83). Since Rosenfield’s publication, further images



celebrating the Kushan elite have been discovered, notably at the sites of Khalchayan in Uzbekistan and Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan (Pugachenkova, 1971; Schlumberger, Le Berre, and Fussman). Boris J. Stavisky subsequently outlined two stylistic phases (Stavisky, 1986, pp. 243-45). The first one is illustrated by the cycle of clay reliefs uncovered at Khalchayan ([Figure 1](#)). This monument was alternatively identified as a temple or a ceremonial pavilion, and it belongs to a stage preceding the reign of Kanishka I (r. ca. 127-53; for the various theories proposed for the date of Kanishka's year 1, see [KUSHAN DYNASTY i](#) and [iii](#)), when the Kushan dynasty was establishing itself. The Kushan royal clan is shown in a portrait group, where female and male members are represented seated or standing. Despite the static frontal poses, figures are treated with realistic features. The faces are expressive and display the characteristics of age, high status, and ethnicity; features such as the cranial deformation and mongoloid traits are rendered. The vibrant impression that emanates from this composition contrasts with the standardized characteristic of the second phase. The latter is embodied by portrait-statues in limestone and red sandstone discovered in the temples of Surkh Kotal and Maṭ, respectively, as well as by the official portraits struck on coins. The body of the king is depicted in a front view, his head is seen in profile, and his feet are spread apart. The images that display monumentality, rigidity, and frontality have been stylistically related to Parthian art from [Dura Europos](#), Palmyra, and [Hatra](#) by Daniel Schlumberger and John Rosenfield (Schlumberger, 1960, pp. 131-66; Rosenfield, pp. 154-83).

Although formal standards appear to evolve, the iconographic features of these portrayals of the Kushan kings show recurring patterns. These artistic expressions of the glory and power of the dynasty draw upon a common repertoire that stems from diverse cultural and artistic traditions. In their portraits, Kushan rulers have retained the fashion of their Central Asian nomadic ancestors: the heavy caftans, the felt boots, the hooded cap, and the golden bracteates sewn on tunics (Grenet, 2012, p. 15). After [Huvishka](#) (r. ca. 153-91), this fashion is replaced by the scale armor of the military elite ([Figure 2](#), [Figure 3](#)). The symbols of power and victory displayed by the rulers are borrowed from the Greek and Iranian spheres. Thus, the Greek deities Nike and Athena are depicted in the cycle from Khalchayan next to an Iranian protectress of royalty (Grenet, 2012, p. 12). Likewise, on a painting on cotton cloth said to be from southern Xinjiang, published by Boris Marshak and Franz Grenet and dated with radiocarbon dating to 74-258 CE, a winged *putto* carrying a garland flies above the figure of a king. The latter, who was



identified as Huvishka by the authors on the basis of iconographic parallels with his coinage, is handing over a bow and a quiver, a motif that is in turn taken to be a Scythian symbol of legitimacy (Grenet and Marshak, pp. 947-60).

This eclecticism also characterizes the representation of divinities that the dynasty accepted for its numismatic pantheon. Numismatic types show a preference for Iranian gods, but the presence of Greek, Brahmanic, and Buddhist divinities reflects an open-minded policy towards religious trends (see, for instance, the rich iconography of the coinage of Huvishka, Göbl, 1984, pp. 64-76, pls. 10-27). The depictions of these divinities, Zoroastrian and Brahmanic ones especially, are in turn based on various iconographic traditions. Iranian gods are portrayed under the guise of their accepted Greek and Brahmanic equivalents (Grenet, 2010, pp. 87-99), and Brahmanic divinities borrow their attributes from various gods; the composite nature of these images reflects a formative phase in Brahmanic iconography (Bopearachchi). It is thus this tendency to draw upon the diverse cultural, religious, and artistic traditions with which the dynasty came into contact that best defines the visual propaganda of the Kushans.

Buddhist art. The Kushan period matches with the blossoming of two major schools of Buddhist sculptures, those of Mathura (Uttar Pradesh, India) and Gandhara (Northwest Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan). The two schools are associated with the earliest anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha, and, during the first half of the 20th century, scholarly debate has sought to establish the precedence of one school over the other and to account for the apparition of the Buddha image (Foucher, 1913; Coomaraswamy; Deydier, pp. 5-28, 46-64, 223-49; Guenée, pp. 197-201). Within the Gandharan context, the coinage of Kanishka I bearing an image of the Buddha on the reverse provides indisputable evidence that anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha were made during his reign. Scholars have, however, invoked the sculptures from Butkara I found in association with lifetime issues of the [Indo-Scythian king Azes II](#) (r. ca. 15/5 BCE/6 AD – 17/20 CE) to posit an earlier date (Faccenna, 1962, 1980-81; Göbl, 1976, pls. I-II, nos. 15-27 and 28-59; van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, 1981; Faccenna, 2003). With regard to Mathura, Sonya Quintanilla has argued on stylistic grounds that the earliest Buddha image recorded is a small carving on a railing fragment from Īsāpur attributed to the time of Śoḍāsa (r. ca. 15 CE), and that the earliest large-scale images of the Buddha sculpted in the round start to emerge from ca. 50-100 CE (Quintanilla, 2007, pp. 199-205, 219-48). Concerning images with an inscribed date, the statue set up in



Sarnath by the monk Bala in the third year of Kanishka I provides a *terminus ante quem* for the production of Buddhist icons in the round in Mathura (Schopen). While this estimation of a chronology for the apparition and development of anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha has received fairly widespread agreement, a single, hitherto unknown, dated image would call for its reconsideration.

As far as the characteristics of Buddhist art from the Kushan period are concerned, the school of Mathura is essentially known for images carved on the railings of stupas and for stele statues representing divinities of the Buddhist pantheon (Buddha, Bodhisattva, and tutelary divinities) sculpted in the mottled red sandstone found in the nearing quarries of Sīkri. Studies by David Snellgrove, Johanna E. van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, and Sonya Quintanilla have highlighted the role of depictions of not only *yakṣas* and *nāgas*, as previously suggested by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (Coomaraswamy, pp. 297-313), but also of Jinas, Brahmins, and ascetic teachers in the construction of the Buddha's iconography (Snellgrove, pp. 52-55; van Lohuizen-de Leeuw, p. 153; Quintanilla, pp. 199-205), notably for elements such as the knob at the top of the cranium (*uṣṇīṣa*) and the thin cloth (*saṃghāti*) molding the chest. As for formal features of Mathuran images, sculptures found on the sites of Katra, Jamalpur, Kaṅkāli Tīlā, and Palikhera, to name but a few, are characterized by their generous proportions, broad shoulders, large chest, and round head with full-cheeks and fleshy smiling mouth (Figure 4).

The Gandharan production consists of images primarily carved in a mica-schist stone but also molded into stucco, clay, and plaster. These are statues of Buddhist divinities as well as reliefs illustrating events of the Buddha's past lives (*jātaka*) and last existence. This Buddhist discourse is served by an aesthetic idiom that results from the historical heritage of the region and draws upon Indian, Greco-Roman, and Iranian iconographic and formal repertoires. Statues of Bodhisattvas displaying strong Hellenistic features such as the muscular torso, the aquiline nose, and thin lips, the hair in a *krobylos* (gathered at the nape of the neck and tied up), and the drapery falling in heavy folds (Figure 5) are probably still considered by many as the epitome of the Gandharan school. Yet the material excavated in various parts of the region shows that the Gandharan production covers other artistic expressions. The curvaceous *yakṣīs* from Butkara I (Swāt Valley) bear resemblance with their counterparts from Bhārhut and Mathura, while some scholars have associated the strict frontality of Buddha on steles from Kabul-Kāpisā (see BEGRĀM) to



Parthian models (Bussagli, pp. 279-81, Cambon, p. 25).

This overview of Buddhist art of the Kushan period would not be complete without mentioning the production of [Bactria](#). As evidenced by the inscriptions and numismatic finds in the establishments around [Balkh](#) and Termez, Buddhism was spread north of the Hindu Kush by the Kushan rule, in the times of Azes II and Soter Megas (r. ca. 92/97–100 CE; Fussman). The remains from monasteries and stupas of Qara Tepe, Fayāz Tepe, and Zurmala show that, with regard to iconography, motifs are similar to those created in Gandhāra, yet essentially expressed in plaster, clay, and limestone ([Figure 6](#); Abdullaev, pp. 32-41; Leriche and Pidaev, pp. 55-73; Leriche, Pidaev, and Genequand, pp. 403-9; Vivdenko, pp. 42-47). As for formal features, Bactrian images share with Gandharan ones a common [Hellenistic](#) and Iranian heritage, yet the Bactrian artistic expression is probably that which displays most affinity with Kushan dynastic art. This is notably exemplified by the paintings from Qara Tepe depicting rows of donors, whose body is seen in front view, while the head is in profile (Bussagli, 1963, pp. 23; Stavisky, 1986, pp. 247).

It is in Buddhist art that the impact of the art of the Kushan period is best observed. Broadly, while iconographic and formal features elaborated around Mathura have provided the essential source for images produced under the rule of the Guptas (ca. 320-500) in Mathura and Sarnath, the art which developed in the oases of [Chinese Turkestan](#) ([Khotan](#), Miran, Kucha, [Turfan](#), and [Dunhuang](#)) from the 4th century onwards finds many of its prototypes in Gandhara and Bactria.

Brahmanic and Jain arts. With regard to Brahmanic art, while depictions of Lakṣmī or Balarāma-Saṃkarṣaṇa and Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa are attested as early as the 2nd century BCE, the corporeal representations of divinities such as Śiva, Viṣṇu, or Skanda-Kārttikeya, who are central to what is alternatively referred to as late Brahmanism, popular Brahmanism, or Hinduism is modelled during the Kushan period with images being produced in both Gandhara and Mathura (Kreisel; Bopearachchi; Srinivasan, pp. 130-34). A stele showing a three-headed and four-armed divinity with a third central eye which one could identify as Śiva ([Figure 7](#)) illustrates some of the dynamics at play in his iconographic construction as highlighted by Maurizio Taddei (Taddei, 1985; Giuliano). Firstly, the image points to the use of lexical units that are borrowed from or common to depictions of Buddhist divinities. In this case, the general outline, the hairstyle, and the moustache are similar to



representations of Bodhisattvas. Secondly, the iconography is composite. The attributes that the god carries belong to various gods of the Brahmanic pantheon: Śiva (the trident), Brahmā (the water pot), and Viṣṇu (the wheel). The non-codified character of the iconography makes the god difficult to identify with certainty and indicates that, during the Kushan period, iconography of Brahmanic gods was emerging and being formulated.

As for Jain art, the stylistic analysis of an architrave from Kaṅkāli Tīlā depicting the renunciation of Ṛṣabhanātha as well as a statue of Parśvanātha in the State Museum Lucknow has lead Quintanilla (pp. 37-50, 93-95) to conclude that anthropomorphic representations of Tīrthankaras already existed in 100 BCE and that freestanding iconic images were produced by the early 1st century CE. Dedicatory inscriptions suggests that, while the anthropomorphic image of Jinas was known in pre-Kushan times, sculptures in the round of a single Tīrthankara and of four adorned Tīrthankaras facing the cardinal directions (*sarvatobhadrikā*) were not carved before their rule (Lüders, pp. 44-48; Joshi; Shah, pp. 112-204). In his survey of Jain art from Mathura, Niketa P. Joshi establishes a typology of depictions of Tīrthankaras and remarks that seven out of the twenty-four are identifiable, although not yet distinguished by their respective *lāñchana*. These are represented in strict nudity, standing or seated in meditation, often, although not always, carrying the *śrīvatsa* (a symbol of good omen) on their chest (see Wayman). Although already produced in pre-Kushan times, another type of object, *āyāga-paṭa* (votive tablets), seems to have gained popularity during the early Kushan period. These tablets in stone are engraved with auspicious symbols or images of Tīrthankaras. According to Quintanilla's stylistic analysis of material from Mathura, while several *āyāga-patas* should be dated as early as 150 BCE, the majority should be attributed to a period between 50 BCE and 100 CE (Quintanilla, pp. 97-141).

Architectural decor. An overview of all the other artifacts of the Kushan period (Gandharan trays, Bactrian ceramics or terra-cotta from India, to name but a few) cannot be provided here; the reader is referred to the related bibliography (Francfort; Litvinsky; Jayaswal; Leriche and Pidaev, pp. 73-78). Being a representative example of the artistic culture of the time, architectural décor nevertheless deserves further attention. It is generally characterized by the coexistence of motifs from various origins in a coherent whole. Structures, whose ground plan and outline alternatively point to Iranian or Indian models (Schlumberger, Le Berre, and Fussman; Behrendt), are adorned with a



classical column facing. The Attic molding of columns, pilasters, and entablature, as well as capitals of the Corinthian type, belong to the Hellenistic ornamental repertoire. Other elements, such as the motif of merlons decorated with false, arrow-shaped loopholes found at Surkh Kotal or on representations of monuments on narrative reliefs from Gandhara, find their origin in the architecture from Iran. Capitals in turn reflect the Western Mediterranean, Iranian, and Indian traditions altogether. The combination of figured motifs against rows of acanthus leaves seen in capitals from Butkara I (Gandhara), Airtam, Sham Kala, or Qara Tepe (Bactria) is borrowed from the Hellenistic tradition. However, while the motif of donors holding lotuses refers to the Indian realm, zoomorphic elements are taken from the Persepolitan repertoire (Figure 8).

In sum, it is probably the fusion of elements from Classical, Iranian, Central Asian, and Indian origin expressed into organic, yet undeniably heterogeneous, productions that defines best the term “Kushan art.” The disparity but also wealth of these idioms is accounted for their various functions, production environment and materials.

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