

# Gandharan Buddhist sculpture

पृथ्वी  
prithvi  
earth

प्रेत  
pret  
demon

ध्यान  
dhyaan  
meditation

The kingdom of Gandhara, located in the region of present-day northern Pakistan and Afghanistan, was part of the Kushan Empire.<sup>1</sup> It was located near overland trade routes and links to the ports on the Arabian Sea and consequently its art incorporated Indian, Persian and Graeco-Roman styles. The latter style, brought to Central Asia by Alexander the Great (327/26–325/24 BC) during his conquest of the region, particularly influenced the art of Gandhara. This stylistic influence is evident in facial features, curly hair and classical style costumes seen in images of the Buddha and *bodhisattvas* that recall sculptures of Apollo, Athena and other Graeco-Roman gods.<sup>2</sup>

Buddhism was the dominant religion of the Kushan Empire and the basic repertoire of Buddhist iconography was developed during the Kushan period around the first century BC.<sup>3</sup> Prior to this time the Buddha was not shown in human form but was indicated by various symbols, including footprints, a deer and a bodhi tree, which refer to the Buddha himself and to episodes from the Buddha's life.<sup>4</sup> The use of symbols to visualise the Buddha illustrate that the Buddha was initially not considered a god, but as a mortal who, through his teachings and example, provided a role model for those who sought salvation through their own actions. However, during the Gandharan period, during the first century AD, anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha first appear. These indicate the Buddha had become a saviour and a god, and therefore his depiction in human form required iconographical conventions that identified his divine nature. This iconography drew on conventions used to depict gods in Persia, Rome and India, and included the use of a halo to signify divinity.

Smaller stone images like the Gandharan *Buddha* illustrated may have originally functioned as decorations for the casings of Gandharan *stupas* (commemorative structures containing sacred Buddhist relics). The stupa decorations often depicted scenes of daily life and the life of the Buddha, and portraits of deities and mortals. Materials included schist and stucco, the latter usually painted in naturalistic colours.

The iconography of Buddha images is codified into postures (*asanas*), gestures (*mudras*) and attributes (objects held by the Buddha), to refer to various scenes from the Buddha's life. The Gandharan Buddha is seated in the lotus position (*padmasana*), with his hands in the gesture of meditation (*dhyana mudra*), referring to the Buddha's periods of meditation during his quest for enlightenment.

Images of the Buddha gradually developed a standard iconography of physical details that identify the figure as the Buddha. Some of the physical characteristics conform to the thirty-two marks of a great man (*lakshanas*) which were codified in India in the pre-Buddhist era. For example, the Buddha is depicted with a protuberance on the top of his head called an *ushnisha*. It may have originated in the bun hairstyle once worn by Nepalese nobility (the Buddha was born into a noble family), but is generally considered a sign of the Buddha's wisdom and enlightenment. The Buddha has long earlobes that recall the heavy earrings he once wore before he renounced his wealth. The tuft of hair between his eyes, the *urna*, is a symbol of wisdom. A wide variety of styles developed within this iconographic framework across the Buddhist world.

**GANDHARAN**  
*Buddha*  
2nd – 4th century AD, Gandhara  
schist  
39.4 x 25.9 x 9.4 cm  
Presented through The Art Foundation of  
Victoria by Sir James Plimsoll AC CBE,  
Governor, 1982 (AS12-1982)

- 1 Central Asian tribes unified to form the Kushan Empire in the first century BC.
- 2 The concept of the *bodhisattva* developed in Buddhist philosophy during the first century AD. A *bodhisattva* is defined as one who has attained Enlightenment but instead of becoming a Buddha elects to remain on earth and help others on their path to Enlightenment.
- 3 The details of the Buddha Shakyamuni's life are not known for certain but scholars generally agree that he lived in Nepal and northern India between c. 563 and c. 483 BC. He was a member of the noble Sakya clan, the son of King Suddhodana and Queen Mayadevi. The title Buddha refers to one who has attained Enlightenment and the term Shakyamuni translates as the sage (*muni*) of the Sakya (lion) clan. No complete biography of the Buddha's life was compiled until centuries after his death, and depictions of the Buddha's life generally conform to a standard series of events and form one of the main subjects in Buddhist art. These events describe the Buddha's gradual progress towards Enlightenment and also visualise the philosophies underlying Buddhist beliefs. Before the Buddha was born on earth he was a *bodhisattva* in Tushita heaven (the home of the contented gods). He beheld the suffering of the world and decided to descend to earth and spread the Dharma (Buddhist teachings) in order to end the suffering of sentient beings.
- 4 The footprints represent the presence of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. According to Buddhist legend, the Buddha left an impression of his feet on a stone just before he died. Deer symbolise the Deer Park at Sarnath in northern India, which is the site of the Buddha's first sermon after attaining enlightenment. The bodhi tree represents the Buddha's enlightenment. Prince Siddhartha meditated under a bodhi tree prior to his enlightenment, after which he became the historical Buddha Shakyamuni.

