

GANDHĀRA AND MATHURĀ ARTISTIC TRADITIONS AND THEIR RECEPTION IN BUDDHIST ART OF THE MEKONG REGION (IInd – 14th CENTURIES): A CASE STUDY OF CHAMPA AND VIETNAM

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Abstract

The sculptural representation of the Buddha emerged in India around the second century BCE, with the Gandhāra and Mathurā traditions playing a foundational role in the formation of Buddhist sacred imagery. These two schools established enduring iconographic and stylistic models that were transmitted widely across Asia. In Vietnam, the reception of Gandhāra and Mathurā artistic traditions involved not simple imitation but a process of selective adaptation and localization, integrating Indian forms with indigenous aesthetic values and religious culture. This study argues that Vietnamese Buddhist sculpture represents a creative transformation of Indian prototypes, resulting in a distinctive artistic tradition characterized by serenity, refinement, and cultural harmony. The interaction between Indian and Vietnamese Buddhist art highlights the role of Buddhist visual culture as a vital medium of intercultural exchange between India and Vietnam.

Keywords: Buddhist sculpture; Gandhāra art; Mathurā art; Mekong region; Vietnam; Champa; cultural transmission

Introduction

Buddhism originated in India and was founded by the Buddha Gautama in the sixth century BCE. As a Master of humans, the Buddha came to symbolize supreme wisdom and boundless compassion. The aspiration to express reverence for the Buddha through language, literature, poetry, and visual art gradually emerged among his followers.

However, during the early phase of Buddhist history - prior to the development of formal artistic and sculptural schools - the Buddha was not represented in anthropomorphic form, either

in painting or sculpture.¹ This aniconic tradition reflected deep reverence for the Master and corresponded to broader cultural patterns in ancient Indian religious traditions such as Hinduism and Jainism. Instead of human images, the Buddha was symbolized through sacred motifs: the Lumbinī Garden representing his birth, the Bodhi tree symbolizing enlightenment, and the stūpa signifying Parinirvāṇa and serving as a reliquary for sacred relics. Veneration of relics and stūpas thus became a central devotional practice in early Buddhism.

Other symbolic representations, such as the Buddha's footprints, the Wheel of Dharma (dharmacakra), and the lotus flower, also functioned as objects of reverence.² These symbolic motifs are prominently depicted in the reliefs at Sanchi and Bharhut, illustrating the early Buddhist preference for symbolic rather than anthropomorphic representation.

From around the second century BCE, the emergence of two major artistic traditions—Gandhāra and Mathurā—marked a decisive turning point in the history of Buddhist art. The growing devotional need for visualizing and venerating the Buddha in human form gave rise to a rich tradition of sculptural representation. Through the distinctive artistic perspectives of Gandhāra and Mathurā, Buddha images were shaped in diverse styles and materials, spreading widely and profoundly influencing Buddhist art in later periods, including in Vietnam.

An Overview of Gandhāra and Mathurā Artistic Traditions

Characteristics of the Gandhāra Style

Gandhāra was a vast region corresponding to parts of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. Gandhāran art developed under strong Greco-Roman influence introduced by Alexander the Great during his military campaigns in 327–326 BCE. Under the Mauryan dynasty, Emperor Aśoka (268–232 BCE) transformed the region into an important Buddhist center, laying the foundations for subsequent developments in Buddhist art.

¹ Stoneman, Richard (2019). *The Greek Experience of India: From Alexander to the Indo-Greeks*, Princeton University Press. pp. 436–437

² Stoneman, Richard (2019), trg. 437. Mathura Museum No. 1 8.1516,114-15.438 and 10.130.

Gandhāran art flourished particularly during the Kuṣāṇa period (1st–3rd centuries CE), as well as under the Gupta (4th–6th centuries) and Pāla dynasties (7th–11th centuries). The Greco-Roman tradition of anthropomorphic representation significantly influenced Gandhāran sculpture, contributing to the development of Buddhist sacred imagery. Owing to its political, economic, and cultural vitality, Gandhāra became a major hub along the Silk Road, facilitating artistic and religious exchange between East and West. Gandhāran artistic influence extended across West Asia, the Himalayan region, and East Asia, including Tibet, Bhutan, China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

Under the reign of King Kaniṣka, Gandhāra emerged as a major center of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Gandhāran art played a crucial role in shaping Mahāyāna Buddhist visual culture, particularly in the anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha. The earliest Buddha images in Gandhāra, dating to the first century BCE,³ display stylistic similarities to Greco-Roman deities such as Apollo.⁴ Numismatic evidence supports this early development: coins of King Maues (1st century BCE) depict a seated Buddha, regarded as one of the earliest known Buddha images. Coins issued by Kadaphes and Kaniṣka further depict standing Buddha figures, often accompanied by inscriptions such as “Boddo.” Additionally, relic stupas from the Kaniṣka period, such as those discovered at Shahji-ki-dheri, incorporate Buddha imagery.⁵

In Gandhāran sculpture, the Buddha is typically depicted with refined facial features, sometimes with a moustache, large half-closed eyes, a high-bridged nose, and flowing drapery reminiscent of Greco-Roman garments. The hair appears in wavy locks rather than tight curls, with a prominent uṣṇīṣa symbolizing wisdom. Bodhisattva figures are often adorned with jewelry, earrings, and princely ornaments. The Buddha’s robe (saṅghātī) is thick and heavy, with deep, clearly defined folds, usually covering both shoulders. The halo, when present, is generally plain and undecorated. Gandhāran sculptures were commonly carved from grey schist, bluish stone, or terracotta.

³ *The art of Gandhara in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. 2007-12-01.

⁴ B.C. Sharma (1984), *Buddhist art of Mathura*, Agam Kala Prakashan, Delhi, p. 150

⁵ B.C. Sharma (1984), *trg.* 150-151.

Characteristics of the Mathurā Style

Mathurā is located in northern India, along the Yamunā River basin, corresponding to present-day Uttar Pradesh and the National Capital Region of Delhi. The Mathurā artistic tradition represents the continuation and transformation of ancient indigenous Indian culture, rooted in the Harappan or Indus civilization (c. 13th century BCE). As such, Mathurā may be regarded as one of the oldest continuous artistic traditions of the Indian subcontinent, closely associated with the cultural heritage of the Dravidian peoples.

The Mathurā school exerted a significant influence on Buddhist art in regions surrounding India, particularly in South and Southeast Asia. Its stylistic impact can be observed in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia (Khmer), Champa (central Vietnam), Thailand, Laos, Indonesia, and Malaysia.

The earliest anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha at Mathurā date from approximately 50 BCE to 50 CE, with more securely datable examples appearing during the reign of King Kaniṣka (r. c. 127–150 CE). To date, no Buddha images conclusively predating the Kaniṣka period have been identified at Mathurā. Royal patronage under Kaniṣka provided decisive support for Buddhist institutions and artisans, facilitating large-scale production of Buddha images. In this sense, Mathurā played a foundational role in the origin and dissemination of Buddha imagery. Gandhāran artists subsequently adopted and adapted these innovations, and the close political and cultural ties between Mathurā and Peshawar during the Kuṣāṇa period enabled artistic developments from Mathurā to spread into the Gandhāra region.⁶

Scholarly debates concerning the origin of Buddha images have long addressed the relative precedence of Gandhāra and Mathurā. Early twentieth-century scholars offered divergent views. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, summarizing the debate, observed that available evidence suggests the widespread use of Buddha images shortly before Kaniṣka's reign, possibly around 50 CE, though the evidence remains insufficient to establish definitive priority for either school.⁷ Gangoly, drawing primarily on early Buddhist textual sources, argued that the Buddha image

⁶ B.C. Sharma, *Buddhist art of Mathura*, trg 167

⁷ Coomaraswamy, A.K. "The Origin of the Buddha Image", p. 37.

emerged in the first century BCE. In contrast, Van Lohuizen, based on critical stylistic analysis and archaeological evidence, concluded that Buddha images appeared at Mathurā at least half a century—if not a full century—earlier than in Gandhāra.⁸

Based on examinations of sculptures housed in the Mathurā Museum (Uttar Pradesh), scholars have identified key stylistic features of the Mathurā school. Buddha figures are typically robust in form, with full, youthful faces conveying vitality and benevolence. Sculptures are often executed in high relief rather than fully in the round, leaving the reverse side minimally worked. Facial features are clearly articulated and expressive. The halo behind the Buddha's head frequently displays a wavy outline and decorative motifs. The hair is arranged in a topknot shaped like a conch shell (*kaparda*), leading to the designation of such images as *Kapardin*.

The right hand is commonly raised in the *abhaya mudrā* (gesture of fearlessness), positioned above the shoulder as a sign of protection. A cushion-like decorative element often appears between the raised hand and the shoulder. The *ūrṇā* between the eyebrows is typically rendered in relief or incised. Almond-shaped eyes are fully open, and the facial expression conveys a gentle smile. The left hand rests on the thigh or knee, sometimes clenched, evoking the dignified bearing of a *cakravartin* (wheel-turning monarch). The legs are crossed in the *padmāsana* (lotus posture).⁹

The Buddha's robe (*saṅghāṭi*) usually covers one shoulder while leaving the other exposed, though some images depict both shoulders covered. The robe is thin and clings closely to the body, revealing anatomical contours. Particularly noteworthy are images of the Buddha during ascetic practice, such as the famous *Fasting Buddha*, in which ribs, veins, and emaciated flesh are rendered with remarkable realism. This emphasis on corporeal realism reflects an Indian aesthetic sensibility that underscores endurance, discipline, and spiritual resolve. Such ascetic representations are absent in Gandhāran art and constitute a distinctive feature of the Mathurā tradition.

⁸ Gangoli, O.C. (1938), “*The antiquity of the Buddha Image*”; *The Cult of the Buddha*, O.Z., Neue Folge, Vol. XIV, p. 56.

⁹ B.C. Sharma, *Buddhist art of Mathura*, trg. 176 - 178

Mathurā sculptures commonly depict the Buddha seated in meditation or standing, with one hand holding the robe and the other forming an auspicious gesture. The hair is rendered in small, tightly coiled curls arranged clockwise, with a prominent cranial protuberance.¹⁰ Representative works include images of the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Hindu deities, and royal figures such as King Kaniṣka—many carved from the characteristic red sandstone that defines Mathurā sculpture.

Routes of Buddhist Transmission into Vietnam

When discussing the transmission of Buddhism into Vietnam from the first centuries of the Common Era, it is essential to recognize that this process unfolded through multiple interconnected routes rather than along a single linear path. Buddhism reached the region of Giao Châu at a relatively early date, and several historical sources suggest the presence of Indian monks as early as the first century CE. Indirect evidence for this early transmission can be found in classical texts such as the *Liang Gaoseng Zhuan* and *Linh Nam Trich Quái*, which record the arrival of the monk Khâu Đà La at Luy Lâu (present-day Bắc Ninh), where he propagated the Dharma and established temples.

During this period, Luy Lâu functioned as a major center of commerce and cultural exchange, connecting southern China with the central and northern coastal regions of present-day Vietnam. Early Buddhist missionaries to the region are recorded as including the Indian monks Mahāīvaka and Kālācārya, who arrived in Giao Châu during the late Eastern Han dynasty, under the administration of Governor Sĩ Nhiếp (r. 168–189 CE). The name Kālācārya, possibly derived from Sanskrit and meaning “the dark-skinned sage,” suggests a Dravidian origin from southern India. The presence of numerous Indian monks in Luy Lâu under the patronage of Sĩ Nhiếp is further attested in a letter written by Yuan Hui to Xun Xu in 207 CE.¹¹

Maritime Routes

One of the primary routes by which Buddhism entered Vietnam was the maritime network linking India with Southeast Asia. This sea route extended from the Indian subcontinent across

¹⁰ B.C. Sharma, trg. 187

¹¹ Nguyễn Tài Thư (2008), *History of Buddhism in Vietnam, South East Asia*, CRVP, trg. 36

the Indian Ocean, through the Strait of Malacca, into the Gulf of Thailand, reaching the port settlements of Óc Eo, and subsequently the central and northern regions of Vietnam. The archaeological remains of Óc Eo culture (associated with the Funan polity, 1st–7th centuries CE) include numerous Buddhist artifacts, among which several sculptures display clear stylistic affinities with Gandhāra and Mathurā traditions. This maritime route facilitated direct contact, as Indian merchants and monks traveled together, bringing with them Buddhist scriptures, ritual objects, and artistic conventions.

Routes via China: Combined Overland and Maritime Networks

A second major route involved a combination of overland and maritime travel through Central Asia and China. From India, Buddhism spread along the Silk Road into Central Asia and onward to China. From there, Buddhist doctrines, images, and artistic styles were transmitted southward into Giao Châu. Buddhist sculptures and paintings introduced through this northern route reflect the influence of Mahāyāna Buddhism and incorporate Gandhāran stylistic elements mediated through Central Asia and China. This indirect route is particularly significant in explaining why Vietnamese Buddhist art of the Lý and Trần dynasties exhibits strong Chinese stylistic characteristics while still retaining traces of Gandhāran influence.

Routes via Champa

A third important route passed through the kingdom of Champa in central Vietnam. Buddhism arrived in Champa primarily by sea from India and subsequently spread northward into Giao Châu. Champa's artistic tradition, particularly between the fourth and tenth centuries, integrated both Hindu and Mahāyāna Buddhist elements. Sculptures from sites such as Đồng Dương (Quảng Nam) demonstrate clear stylistic affinities with Mathurā and Gandhāra, combined with strong indigenous characteristics. Champa thus functioned as a cultural intermediary, facilitating the transmission and transformation of Indian Buddhist artistic models before their incorporation into northern Vietnamese contexts.

Mechanisms of Artistic Transmission

In terms of artistic transmission, Gandhāran influence reached Vietnam primarily through Mahāyāna Buddhist networks, either via Central Asia and China or directly through maritime trade to Funan and Champa. Mathurā influence, by contrast, was transmitted largely through maritime routes, particularly evident in sculptural remains from Funan and Champa, before extending into the northern regions of Vietnam. Vietnam therefore received both direct influences from India and indirect influences mediated through intermediary regions, subsequently transforming these artistic traditions into localized Vietnamese forms.

Vietnamese Buddhist Sacred Sculpture (2nd–14th Centuries)

Vietnamese Buddhist sacred sculpture from the second to the fourteenth centuries reflects a long and complex process of reception, transformation, and localization of Indian Buddhist artistic traditions. Throughout this period, Vietnamese artisans selectively absorbed stylistic elements from Gandhāra and Mathurā while integrating indigenous aesthetics, religious sensibilities, and socio-political contexts. As a result, Vietnamese Buddhist art developed a distinctive visual language that embodies both universal Buddhist ideals and localized cultural expressions.¹²

Early Buddhist Sculpture (2nd–7th Centuries)

The earliest phase of Buddhist sculpture in Vietnam is closely associated with the cultural sphere of Funan and Óc Eo, as well as with early centers in northern Vietnam such as Luy Lâu. Archaeological discoveries from Óc Eo reveal Buddha images and Bodhisattva figures carved in stone and cast in bronze, many of which exhibit clear stylistic affinities with Gandhāran and Mathurā prototypes. These early sculptures typically depict the Buddha in standing or seated meditation postures, with simplified drapery and restrained anatomical modeling.

Gandhāran influence is particularly evident in the treatment of the robe, which in some examples shows linear folds and a sense of volumetric depth reminiscent of Greco-Roman sculptural conventions. At the same time, Mathurā influence can be observed in the frontal posture, robust bodily proportions, and serene facial expressions. These features suggest that

¹² Van, Vu Hong (2020). *The Imprint of Buddhist in Pagoda Architecture under the Ly Dynasty and Historical Values*.

early Vietnamese Buddhist sculpture was not merely derivative but already engaged in a process of synthesis, adapting foreign models to local materials and aesthetic preferences.

Buddhist Sculpture during the Lý Dynasty (11th–13th Centuries)

The Lý dynasty (1009–1225) marks a high point in the development of Vietnamese Buddhist art, as Buddhism became the state religion and received strong royal patronage. During this period, Buddhist sculpture flourished in both quantity and artistic refinement. Stone and bronze images of the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and protective deities were widely produced and installed in temples and pagodas across the kingdom.

Lý dynasty Buddha images are characterized by graceful proportions, elongated bodies, and gentle, introspective facial expressions. The influence of Mathurā is discernible in the idealized corporeal form and the emphasis on spiritual vitality, while Gandhāran elements persist in the stylization of the robe and the iconographic conventions of seated meditation and hand gestures (*mudrā*). However, these external influences are fully transformed through a Vietnamese aesthetic sensibility that emphasizes softness, inner tranquility, and harmonious balance.

The lotus pedestal (*padmāsana*) becomes a prominent feature in Lý dynasty sculpture, symbolizing purity and enlightenment. The halo is often elaborately decorated, yet remains restrained in ornamentation. Overall, Lý dynasty Buddhist sculpture reflects a synthesis of Mahāyāna Buddhist ideals, royal authority, and indigenous artistic traditions.

Buddhist Sculpture during the Trần Dynasty (13th–14th Centuries)

Under the Trần dynasty (1225–1400), Vietnamese Buddhist sculpture underwent further stylistic evolution. While Buddhism continued to play a significant role in spiritual and political life, the artistic style became more austere and realistic, reflecting the ethos of the period and the growing influence of Zen (Thiền) Buddhism.

Trần dynasty Buddha images exhibit stronger bodily structures, more pronounced facial features, and a greater emphasis on meditative concentration. Compared to the Lý period, decorative elements are reduced, and the overall composition conveys a sense of solemnity and inner strength. Gandhāran influence can still be detected in the structural clarity of the figure

and the treatment of drapery, while Mathurā influence persists in the dignified posture and the affirmation of spiritual presence through corporeal form.¹³

Zen Buddhist aesthetics, with their emphasis on simplicity and direct realization, played a crucial role in shaping the visual language of Trần dynasty sculpture. Images of eminent monks and patriarchs, rendered with individualized facial features, reflect a shift toward realism and psychological depth, marking a distinctive contribution of Vietnamese Buddhist art to the broader Buddhist world.

Champa Buddhist Sculpture

In parallel with developments in northern Vietnam, the kingdom of Champa in central Vietnam produced a rich corpus of Buddhist sculpture that reveals strong connections with Indian artistic traditions. Champa Buddhist art, particularly from the seventh to the tenth centuries, displays pronounced Mathurā influence in its robust figures, frontal composition, and expressive vitality. Gandhāran elements are also present, especially in the iconography of Bodhisattvas and the stylistic treatment of drapery.¹⁴

Champa artisans skillfully adapted Indian models to local sandstone materials and regional aesthetic preferences, resulting in sculptures that combine spiritual intensity with dynamic movement.¹⁵ These works played an important intermediary role in transmitting Indian Buddhist artistic forms into northern Vietnam, contributing to the formation of a shared yet diverse Buddhist visual culture across the region.¹⁶

¹³ Tống Trung Tín (1997), *Nghệ thuật điêu khắc Việt Nam thời Lý và thời Trần (thế kỷ XI – XIV)*, NXB Hà Nội, tr. 56.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Guillon (2001), *Hindu-Buddhist art of Vietnam: treasures from Champa*, Trumbul, Conn: Weatherhill, USA, pp. 14-16.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Guillon (2001), p. 15.

¹⁶ Emmanuel Guillon (2001), *Hindu-Buddhist art of Vietnam: treasures from Champa*, pp. 81-83.

Localization and Vietnamese Adaptation

The most distinctive characteristic of Vietnamese Buddhist sacred sculpture lies not in the mere reception of Gandhāran and Mathurā artistic forms, but in the process of localization through which these external influences were transformed into an indigenous visual language. Vietnamese artisans did not replicate Indian prototypes mechanically; rather, they selectively assimilated formal elements and reinterpreted them in accordance with local religious sensibilities, aesthetic ideals, and socio-historical conditions.

One of the most notable aspects of this localization is the softening of physical form. While Gandhāran sculpture emphasizes anatomical realism and Mathurā sculpture celebrates corporeal vitality, Vietnamese Buddhist images tend toward gentle proportions, smooth surfaces, and inward-looking expressions. Facial features are often rendered with a serene smile and lowered gaze, conveying compassion (*karuṇā*) and meditative absorption (*dhyāna*). This aesthetic orientation reflects the Vietnamese emphasis on harmony, moderation, and inner tranquility.

In terms of iconography, Vietnamese Buddhist sculpture exhibits both continuity and innovation. Standard Indian and Mahāyāna Buddhist symbols—such as the *uṣṇīṣa*, *ūṇā*, lotus pedestal, and canonical *mudrā*—are consistently retained. However, their execution is simplified and integrated into a coherent visual whole. Decorative elements are reduced, and emphasis is placed on spiritual presence rather than dramatic visual impact. This tendency becomes particularly pronounced during the Trần dynasty under the influence of Thiền (Zen) Buddhism, which values direct experience and simplicity over elaborate symbolism.

Material and technique also play a crucial role in the localization process. Vietnamese sculptors worked primarily with stone, wood, and bronze, adapting Indian iconographic conventions to the constraints and possibilities of local materials. Wood carving, in particular, allowed for greater subtlety in facial expression and surface treatment, contributing to the distinctive softness of Vietnamese Buddhist images.

Royal patronage further shaped the localized character of Vietnamese Buddhist art. Under the Lý and Trần dynasties, Buddhist sculpture functioned not only as an object of devotion but

also as a symbol of moral authority and political legitimacy. The image of the Buddha thus came to embody the ideal of the enlightened ruler who governs with wisdom and compassion, resonating deeply with Vietnamese conceptions of kingship and social harmony.

Ultimately, the localization of Gandhāran and Mathurā artistic traditions in Vietnam resulted in a uniquely Vietnamese mode of Buddhist representation—one that balances universality and particularity, transcendence and immanence, doctrinal orthodoxy and cultural specificity.

Conclusion

The study of Gandhāran and Mathurā influences on Vietnamese Buddhist sacred sculpture from the second to the fourteenth centuries reveals a dynamic and multi-layered process of cultural transmission and transformation. Rather than a simple diffusion of artistic forms from India to Vietnam, this process involved complex networks of exchange, mediation, and creative adaptation across South Asia, Central Asia, China, and Southeast Asia.

Gandhāran art contributed elements of anatomical structure, drapery treatment, and iconographic clarity, while Mathurā art provided a model of spiritual vitality, frontal dignity, and corporeal idealization. These two major Indian artistic traditions jointly shaped the early formation of Buddhist imagery in Vietnam. Through successive historical periods—particularly under the Lý and Trần dynasties—Vietnamese artisans absorbed these influences and rearticulated them in accordance with local aesthetic values, religious practices, and political ideals.

Vietnamese Buddhist sacred sculpture thus stands as a testament to the creative agency of local cultures in the broader Buddhist world. It demonstrates how universal Buddhist ideals can be visually expressed through diverse cultural forms without losing their doctrinal integrity. The Vietnamese case further highlights the role of Southeast Asia as an active participant, rather than a passive recipient, in the historical development of Buddhist art.

By examining Vietnamese Buddhist sculpture within the wider context of Gandhāran and Mathurā artistic traditions, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of

transregional Buddhist art and underscores the importance of cultural localization in the formation of enduring religious visual languages.

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