

Art and Design

The Image of Buddha in The Visual Arts: Its Evolution and Significance

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Buddhism began with a man named Gautama who became Buddha through enlightenment. Born in luxury, he was forbidden from seeing the outside world so as not to upset him. But when Gautama ventured from his palace, he saw three signs of suffering: a sick man, an old man, and a dead man. On his way home, Gautama saw a religious Hindu. Because of these encounters, Gautama realized he knew nothing of the world. He then ventured out on his own, leaving everything he had to begin a path to enlightenment. Going from luxury to starvation and poverty taught him nothing, so he “decided to try the middle way” (LIFE, 40). He sat under the Bodhi tree with just enough food and water to sustain him during meditation. The Bodhi tree became, therefore, an important symbol for Buddhists because Buddha sat under it for 49 days until he reached enlightenment. He then received the name of Buddha, “the Enlightened One” (LIFE, 41). After teaching for 45 years, Buddha died. It was then that he finally reached Nirvana, or the “goal of all men’s strivings” (LIFE, 41). From this, the basic tenants of Buddha were created.

In the beginning, Buddhism (an oral tradition), used strictly symbolic images. As Henry Honour explains, Buddha himself “was as uninterested in images as he was in ritual” (222). Therefore, the earliest Images in Buddhism were strictly abstract forms, such as the wheel of the law. The Stupa is also one of the earliest expressions in Buddhist art (figure 1.1-1.2). The abstract forms of the Stupa do not compromise the anti-iconographical wishes of Buddha. There are, however, early examples of paintings of cloth used in religious rituals, similar to those used during the reciting of Hindu epics (Honour, 222). This adopted use of a Hindu tra-



Figure 1.1 *Wheel of Buddha's Law*



Figure 1.2 *Great Stupa, Sanchi India*

Buddhism adopted many beliefs from Hinduism. Buddha himself started as a Hindu and believed in many of the same ideals (LIFE, 42) such as a cycle of rebirth. In addition, they both eventually “used images of gods and holy persons in religious ritual” (Kleiner, 440). Hinduism as a religion has no real founder, but it has many gods, including Shiva and Vishnu. The early images of Hindu gods therefore influenced the images of the Buddha, which carried over some of the same motifs.

Buddha Seated on a Lion Throne is an example of early iconographical Buddhist art and commonly used figures. The sculpture shows Buddha sitting on a square base with his body upright, holding his hands in a mudra (figure 2). This particular mudra of is that of fearlessness; the Buddha is telling the viewer to be unafraid. Mudras are the different hand symbols of Buddha; they can be Buddha calling the earth to witness his enlightenment, to say no fear, or various other statements (Kleiner, 439). Other typical symbols include the tuft of white hair on the forehead typically seen as a gem. The usnisha* is another attribute typical of Buddha; it is the bun of hair at the top of his head. Both of these symbolize wisdom. The Wheel of the Law can be seen on Buddha’s feet. The Bodhisattvas, or those who have reached enlightenment but choose to stay behind to help humanity, are also seen typically standing on either side of Buddha. Hinduism did change and influence other aspects in the Buddhist image.



figure 2: *Buddha Seated on a Lion Throne, from Mathura, red sandstone*

When comparing Buddha Seated on the Lion Throne to Hindu images such as Shiva and His Consort Uma, the similarities are evident (figure 3). Shiva sits with his consort, and both are in a yoga pose. Their torsos and the definition of the



Figure 3: *Shiva and his consort Uma*, cave temple carving

The yakshi, a Hindu symbol of fertility and sexuality, also greatly influenced the image of Buddha and the Bodhisattvas. The female yakshi is typically idealized and sexually charged. The yakshas, their male counterparts, were “robust, powerful males, with broad shoulders and eyes open” (Kleiner, 444). Both the yakshi and the yaksha have a body twisted almost in a dance, bent at the waist. Their eyes are as bright as their smile, and their heads tilt to the side (figure, 5).

physique also seem to come from the same tradition. The similarities are evident in the shape of the body and liveliness of the face. This particular statue has close ties to the yakshas and yakshis of Hinduism.



Figure 5: *Yakshi Holding a Fly Whisk, Didarganj and Other Yakshi*

The Buddha in *Buddha Seated on a Lion Throne*, “retains these characteristics with a monk’s robe” (Kleiner, 439). The Bodhisattvas especially look more influenced by Hindu dress and decoration. The Bodhisattvas in figure 2, have a twist at the waist similar to that of the yakshi. They also have a similar smile and head tilt. They hold up fly swatters, a common motif. The fly swatters also show royalty, or in this case the divinity of Buddha. Hinduism nursed the iconographical tradition of Buddhism before it moved onward to China.

When Buddhism emerged in China, it also adapted to the Chinese culture. Buddhism travelled into China by way of the merchant and trade routes from India. China’s principal religion of the time was Confucianism, a religion of philosophical and ethical teachings. To Chinese thinkers, the Buddhist principles of karma and nirvana posed a “stimulating intellectual challenge” (McKay, 321). While the previous Chinese religions had focused on the here-and-now, Buddhist philosophy offered an escape from the politically troubled world of the time. According to McKay, “Buddhism’s emphasis on kindness, charity, and the value of human life also offered hope of a better life on earth as well” (321). The Chinese Buddhists took what they knew of Buddha and made him what they believed he should be.

Buddhism not only offered the Chinese intellectual stimulation but artistic stimulation as well. Because of the trade routes and pilgrims bringing Buddhist images from India, Buddhist sculpture preceded Buddhist architecture in China (Wilkins, 170). The Shakyamuni Buddha illustrates the characteristics of the Chinese sculpted Buddha (figure 6). The “flat and relief-like handling of the robe’s heavy concentric folds” show a more stoic and austere Buddha (Kleiner, 471). The general style of the work, moreover, is different. The statue does not seem to have the same curvature of the body, nor the same playfulness of the yakshi-inspired Buddha of India. But the yoga posture and usnisha are all present, as in the traditional Buddha.



Figure 6: *Shakyamuni Buddha*, from Hebei province, gilded bronze

The image of Buddha also became popular subject matter for Chinese artists. This image from the Diamond sutras is the earliest known block-print of Buddha in China (figure 7). The print shows a Buddhist subject but with a traditional Chinese style. In figure 8, a Confucian print, Confucius teaches his followers, and they sit around him with one particular man in front of him. Buddha in the diamond sutra print also sits and teaches with his followers around him and a single convert in front. The two images have the same composition, and the role of Buddha and Confucius appear the same. The image shows the blend of Buddha into Confucianism and the similarities the Chinese drew between the two teachers.



Figure 7: A page from the Diamond Sutra, British Library



Figure 8: *Confucius teaching his followers* (painting on silk from Taiwan)

When Buddhism migrated to Japan from China, it became more ethereal. The new religion became immediately a political football; while some factions welcomed the new religion, others opposed it strongly (McKay, 335). Japan for many years had practiced Shinto, a spiritual and nature-oriented religion. Shinto still holds the loyalty of many Japanese today (LIFE, 10). This otherworldly and spiritual quality was adapted into Buddhism in the form of Amitabha Buddha.

In the Japanese tradition, Buddha was no longer just a teacher. He was akin to a god, a savior even. In contrast to the Chinese, the Japanese completely immersed themselves in the belief of Buddha as more god than teacher. In the Japanese images of Amitabha Buddha, the god-like qualities of Buddha are highly pronounced. These images were taken to a dying person so that Amida could sweep him to the Pure Land and ensure salvation, as seen in *Amida Descending Over the Mountains* (Kleiner, 506) (figure 9). Buddha peeks over the mountains as two Bodhisattvas sweep down into the scene on clouds, and the moon behind Buddha becomes a halo (Kleiner, 506). This image is indeed a much more otherworldly scene, that of a redeeming god.



Figure 9: *Amida Descending over the Mountains*, Zenrinji Kyoto, hanging scroll



Figure 10: Taizokai (womb world) mandara, Kyoogokokuji (toji) Kyoto, Hanging Scroll

Emphasizing meditation, the Taizokai (Womb World) mandara and ritual womb world allowed the “contemplation of the transcendental concepts central to the religion” (Kleiner, 499) (figure 10). There is a predominately otherworldly quality in the composition. The mandara itself was a Buddhist “structure for the universe” and used for meditation and a “higher spiritual order” (Wilkins, 235). Completely flattened, Buddha and the Bodhisattvas sit frontal to the viewer. The scroll is

so colorful and intricate that a monk could sit and meditate on it for years and find ever-different aspects and features. As Huston Smith says, "what makes art sacred is not what it depicts but the way it opens onto transcendence and carrying the viewer into it, enabling him or her to see what it might be like to live in self-forgetfulness and timeless harmony" (6).

Buddha's image evolved as it passed from India to China and finally to Japan. This evolution was important for a religion that was learning to develop its own iconographic tradition. In India, Buddhism emerged from Hinduism, adopting many of its influences. When Buddhism moved to China, Buddha adapted the Chinese figure style, and in some instances became more austere. In Japan the image of Buddha became more ethereal. Each country's unique culture added to the basic form of Buddha. The ability of Buddhism to change over time shows the versatility of Buddhism as a whole. The need for religious followers to have a visual connection to the things they worship is fundamental, and the visual arts play an important role in manifesting otherworldly truths in a beautiful way.

Works Cited

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