

Five Robed Statues

The most visible manifestation of the First Age of Afro-Eurasian Interchange was the manner in which artistic motifs and styles traveled across the four major cultural pools, especially from West to East. As these ideas and forms moved from one region to another, they were reshaped and blended with native elements to produce striking examples of syncretic (blending) art. The first four sculptures that appear here illustrate the way in which a Greco-Roman artistic style traveled along the Silk Road from the Mediterranean to China. The fifth sculpture suggests how a northwest Indian art style, itself deeply influenced by Hellenistic models, traveled across the Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia.

Hellenistic sculptors were masters at carving expressive faces and draped clothing in order to imbue each sculpted individual with a sense of personality and drama. They also used, to the point of making it a cliché, contrapposto (position of a human figure in painting or sculpture in which the hips and legs are turned in a different direction from that of the shoulders and head: sometimes called “weight shift”) to impart a sense of dynamism to their works.

Our first statue, which portrays Vibia Sabina, the wife of the Roman emperor Hadrian. Created in 136 C.E., this statue presents the empress as a paragon of Roman feminine virtues. Her face, drapery, and even gentle turning of her



foot evoke images of modesty, simplicity, dignity, and sobriety -all elements of the Roman self-image. This particular statue was probably not seen outside of Italy, but its style was universal throughout the Greco-Roman World, and many examples of the style were exported beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire, especially to Rome's immediate neighbor to the east -Parthia.

Our second sculpture -a woman in Southwest Asian dress) -comes from Parthia and dates from the late second or early third century C.E. The work, which illustrates a typical Parthian blend of Greco-Roman and Southwest Asian components, is one of over one hundred similar votive statues discovered at the many shrines of the city of Hatra in northern Mesopotamia. The unknown noblewoman it portrays offered it



in devotion to an equally unknown deity. The statue, which is more than six feet high, affirms the importance of the donor, who stands with her hand raised in reverence.

Our third statue portrays the Buddha. Early Buddhists believed it was wrong to depict the Buddha artistically in human form because he had broken the chains of matter and had achieved Nirvana. For over five hundred years Buddhist artists used such symbols as a wheel, a pipal tree, a throne, a footprint, or a stupa (mound

where sacred relics of the Buddha are laid) to symbolize his last earthly body. Toward the end of the first century C.E., artists in the Kushana province of Gandhara, which today comprises Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan, began representing the Buddha as a human. The sculpture of the standing Buddha that appears here is typical of the many carvings that have survived from this period and place. The setting is the Buddha's first sermon on the Law of Righteousness. Many of the features are distinctively Buddhist. The knot on the top of the Buddha's head is known as the ushnisha and represents his cosmic consciousness, and it probably has no connection whatsoever with the stylish



twist worn by Vibia Sabina. His pierced, distended earlobes symbolize his former royal life; the garment he wears is the sanghat, or monk's robe; the halo, or solar disk, that frames his head is typical of all Gandharan statues of the Buddha and represents his sanctity. His missing right hand probably was raised palm outward in the gesture of blessing. The lotuses, or water lilies, carved into the base of the statue are a Buddhist symbol of purity and peace, therefore Nirvana. But those lotuses are also an example of the syncretic nature of Buddhist art. The lotus first appeared in ancient Egyptian art as a symbol of rebirth, and it made its way to Gandhara and India through Mesopotamia and Iran. Therefore, it should not surprise us that many scholars claim that the style and majesty of the Greco-Roman imperial sculpture that emanated from the workshops of the Mediterranean deeply influenced the creators of the early Gandharan statues of the Buddha.

Our fourth sculpture depicts the Buddha standing on a lotus flower.

Composed of gilded bronze, it was crafted in 477 in the region of China ruled by the Northern Wei Dynasty (380-535). The Northern Wei, Turkic invaders who had conquered and unified northern China during China's long period of political disunity following the collapse of the Han Empire, had adopted the trappings of



Chinese aristocratic culture but added a new element. They were deeply devoted to Mahayana Buddhism and patronized its rapid spread throughout northern China. The statue, missing only its original, attached halo, deals largely with the same theme and setting as the Gandharan Buddha, but artistically it is somewhat different. An excellent example of an emerging Chinese style of Buddhist art, the statue's face and spiraling hair style, as well as its formality, are distinctly Chinese. However, the sensuousness of the statue in which a well-formed body is revealed beneath the almost transparent robes is quite new to Chinese art and probably an import from India.

Our fifth sculpture is a Buddha statue that was excavated in the remains

of the Southeast Asian harbor of Oc Eo, a port city in the ancient kingdom of Funan. During the third century C.E. the kingdom of Funan, established by emigrant Hindus in an area that encompassed portions of modern Vietnam and Cambodia, was already deeply Indianized -at least as far as the culture of its rulers was concerned. The power and wealth of this kingdom attracted not only Indians and Chinese (the latter gave the region its name) but even sailors from the Sassanid Empire of Persia, which had replaced the Parthian Empire early in the third century. By the sixth century, however, due to successful competition from more southerly port areas, Funan's economic and political power was rapidly contracting.

