

The Global Connections of Gandhāran Art

Proceedings of the Third International
Workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project,
University of Oxford, 18th-19th March, 2019

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ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY



ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD

Summertown Pavilion

18-24 Middle Way

Summertown

Oxford OX2 7LG

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-78969-695-0

ISBN 978-1-78969-696-7 (e-Pdf)

DOI: 10.32028/9781789696950

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Acknowledgements

The Gandhāra Connections project could not exist without the generosity and collegiality of scholars from different countries and institutional contexts. This is especially true of the proceedings of the project's annual international workshops, which are produced on an extremely tight timetable and require from the contributors immense efforts of writing and sourcing of photographs. The editors are deeply grateful to all who have participated in this work and in the gathering of March 2019 which underpins the present volume.

This is the third of five projected sets of conference proceedings, which are intended to reach the widest possible audience through parallel print and online, open access editions. As always, we should like to thank David Davison and his colleagues at Archaeopress for making this demanding format successful, particularly in the challenging context of the Covid-19 restrictions of spring 2020. We are also most grateful to Sarah Knights Johnson for her assistance in checking the text before publication.

Above all, we should like to record our profound thanks to the supporters of Gandhāra Connections in its successive phases: the Bagri Foundation, Neil Kreitman, and Richard Beleson. Their generosity and enthusiasm have been fundamental to the whole initiative.

Illustrations

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Preface

Wannaporn Rienjang and Peter Stewart

This volume presents the edited proceedings of the 2019 international workshop of the Gandhāra Connections Project at the University of Oxford's Classical Art Research Centre. For this, the third of the project's main annual conferences, we turned to a topic of fundamental importance for the understanding of Gandhāran art: the remarkable relationships of this regional tradition with the artistic currents of Asia and the Mediterranean. Naturally, these global connections constitute the point of departure for a project generated within a research centre that is principally dedicated to the art of the Graeco-Roman world.

The first two workshops addressed the chronology and the regional geography of Gandhāran art – topics that underlie any wider exploration of the world of Gandhāran art (Rienjang & Stewart 2018; Rienjang & Stewart 2019). The geographical and cultural scope of the current volume is very much broader. We are not only concerned with the 'influence' of Greece and Rome on Gandhāra, much though this has dominated the subject in the last 150 years, but also with the role of other parts of Central and South Asia, and notably with the rich legacy of Gandhāra itself as it contributed to the development of art in China and beyond.

Gandhāran art was created in a region that has been called the 'Crossroads of Asia', an area emblematic of cross-cultural connections and global links in antiquity. Of course, that reputation partly reflects our very modern concerns.¹ In an era of globalization and global communication (never mind the imperial environment in which Gandhāran art was rediscovered), it has been tempting to invent this tradition in our own, modern image. Nevertheless, by any standards, the extent to which the artists and patrons of Buddhist Gandhāra borrowed from and influenced other cultures and lands is quite remarkable. In the last thirty years or so, a consensus has emerged that Gandhāran art drew upon a variety of artistic repertoires – Greek, Roman, Parthian/Persian, and Indian. A more sophisticated appreciation of the complexity of Gandhāran sculpture has emerged as a result; for example, there is greater interest in the complicated relationship of Gandhāran art with India, and even perhaps with the classical world through India. This awareness of multiple inter-cultural links, replacing a presumed binary, linear relationship with the classical world (with the 'West', as it is often misleadingly called), has been neatly summarized by Michael Falser, who describes it as a 'new post-partition pluralistic tendency', associating its origins particularly with the work of Mortimer Wheeler and Maurizio Taddei (Falser 2015; see also Stewart's contribution to this volume). The vision of Gandhāran art as a confluence of styles and iconographies has been presented in some detail by perhaps the last major monograph on the subject, Lolita Nehru's *Origins of the Gandhāran Style: A Study of Contributory Influences*, which was published in 1989.

In Falser's view, Taddei's work contributed to the pluralization and diversification of Gandhāra's position in the global history of art, releasing it from some of the ideological assumptions that hitherto prevailed. But importantly he advocates a more subtle and critical approach to Gandhāran art, which is perhaps impeded even by pluralistic cultural labelling. That is to say, applying a range of alternative labels – Greek, Parthian, Indian, etc. – can have its pitfalls as well. Falser makes a contrast between global history of art and world art history. Global art history is an approach that questions classifications and emphasizes transcultural processes. In contrast, traditional world art history is an additive container

¹ The modern filters that help to determine our vision of Gandhāra are part of the subject of our fourth workshop, originally planned for March 2020 (but delayed to 2021): 'The Rediscovery and Reception of Gandhāran Art'.

which expands to include other cultures and approaches rather than thinking about the dynamic processes of interaction between them. To think in terms of global art history, inevitably means trying to evade from some of the constraints posed, even subconsciously, by cultural nomenclature. It is impossible to escape those names altogether and they will frequently be encountered in this volume. As far as possible, however, we need to keep in mind that they largely are modern inventions, impositions on the ancient material. The interconnected world of ancient art that is the matrix for the studies presented here constantly resists easy classification.

The application of the term 'globalization' to the ancient world is controversial and in various respects anachronistic. Nevertheless, our modern, everyday experience of globalization, should at least help us to recognize the conceptual challenges that the global movements of culture pose. The 'English' language, like fine 'china', or the ubiquitously consumed Coca Cola, are rooted in their countries of origin but have a global life of their own. Just so, to think of Gandhāran art only in terms of East and West, or Greekness and Romanness, or hybridity (Graeco-Buddhist, Indo-Parthian) would be forcefully reductive.

The purpose of this book is neither to explore ancient globalization nor global ancient art and it deals head-on with some of the traditional cultural relationships that have defined the past study of Gandhāran art, especially, in fact, the artists' appropriation of the classical tradition and some of the very direct connections which appear to have existed across vast distances of the ancient world. None the less, the examples and arguments presented here should be viewed against the background of an ancient world whose complexity defies any straightforward 'story of art'.

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