

## BUDDHIST ART IN INDIA

### Mauryan Art

The animal capitals of the Mauryan pillars mark the beginning of Buddhist art in India. The pillars are tapering monolithic shafts with an inverted lotus capital, crowned by an animal sculpture resting on an abacus, and are made of Chunar sandstone with a highly lustrous polish. The animal capitals are characterised by high finish, triumphant execution and symbolical significance. The best examples are provided by the Lion capital from Sarnath and the Bull and Lion capitals from Rampurwa. The Rampurwa Bull is outstanding for its quality of naturalism and nervous tension indicated by pent-up volumes following the anatomical details. The lion sculptures on the Mauryan capitals are more stylised than the figure of Rampurwa Bull, though they are more realistic as suggested by the tense muscles and the swelling veins. The capitals at Rampurwa, Vaishali and Lauriya-Nandangarh have each a single lion figure seated on the haunches in the conventional manner; and of all these the Rampurwa lion displays the most powerful modelling and developed feeling for form.

The quadripartite Lion capital from Sarnath, adopted as the national crest of India, is the best finished and most famous among the animal capitals, though its treatment is generally similar to the single lion figures from Rampurwa and Lauriya-Nandangarh. But it is its abacus, carved with a galloping horse, a striding elephant, a walking bull and a prancing lion which excels in modelling and feeling for form and expression the crowning figures of the four adorsed lions. Compared to the animal figures on the abacus, the lion figures are more stylised and conventional and lack freshness. Although some influence from the Achaemenid art is not ruled out, the attribution of the Sarnath Lion capital to Persepolitan inspiration rests on very slender grounds. The Mauryan capital is entirely Indian in conception and spirit and is imbued with a lively naturalism and fulness of form which is in sharp contrast with the dry aridity of the Persian art tradition.

The affinity of the Mauryan pillar with the Persepolitan column is often stressed and the former is sometimes mistaken as imitated or adapted from the latter. The Persepolitan column, however, is different from the Mauryan one conceptually, functionally as well as stylistically. While the Persepolitan is made up of smaller aggregates and is intended as a true pillar to bear the weight of a superstructure, the Mauryan one is a monolithic animal standard and stands independently as a grand sculpture with no architectural function at all. The Mauryan pillar

is a plain tapering shaft with an inverted lotus capital supporting an animal sculpture, while the Persepolitan column is decorated with flutings and the bell-member forms its basal component. Thus the two are disparate not only in function and design but also in tradition and basic concept. The affinities between the two of form, finish and gloss are really due to the 'inheritance of common artistic traditions' in the words of Coomaraswamy, rather than to direct influence or adaptation.

A rock-cut sculpture depicting the forepart of an elephant at Dhauti in close proximity to the Asokan rock-edicts is imbued with quiet dynamism and shows a remarkable delineation of bulky volume and living flesh. This sculpture is in the indigenous tradition and is superior aesthetically to the animal standards which represent the Mauryan court-art. The only animal standard which approaches it in aesthetic excellence is the Rampurwa Bull, and these two, constituting the finest specimens of the Mauryan art, carry on the indigenous plastic tradition initiated by the Bull seal of Harappa and convincingly bring out the nobility and the quiet dignity of the great animals, ancient known as the *maha-ajaneya-pasus*.

The plastic tradition of the Yaksha and Yakshi figures representing the indigenous folk-cult also flourished during the Mauryan period and continued late into the post-Mauryan times. The earliest stage which may have had its beginning in the pre-Mauryan epoch is represented by the Parkham Yaksha characterised by archaic stolidity, massive frontality and a flattened treatment with no co-ordination of parts. The Patna and Besnagar Yakshas and Yakshis and similar figures found in many parts of north and central India share the burliness and the earth-bound weight with the Parkham Yaksha but show greater roundness of features and less harsh linear treatment, approximating in modelling and plasticity the Yaksha figures on the Sanchi gateways. The culmination is marked by the Didarganj Yakshi; which with its fully rounded form and fluid lines, its lively and sensitive modelling of limbs, its graceful stance and the almost sensuous touch of the soft, warm flesh anticipates the voluptuous Yakshi forms on the Mathura railing.

## SUNGA AND SATAVAHANA ART

The post-Mauryan art which flourished during the Sunga and Andhra-Satavahana periods, was mainly narrative and relished telling the stories sacred to Buddhism in bas-reliefs with a simple and direct diction. This art was truly national and belonged to the people as opposed to the Mauryan art which was a court art and was eclectic and elitist and more sophisticated. The method of narration was synoptic and uni-local or topographical and the time-element was inconsequential. That which existed was real to the artist and the main *dramatis personae*

appeared as many times as required by the story. The figures in the reliefs were shown above and not behind each other and were generally depicted in entirety and seldom as partly hidden. Again, the problems of the perspective or depth and the third dimension were tackled in a peculiar way. Things were shown as large or small not according to their nearness or distance as the optical impression would demand but according to their importance in the story. The figures were shown not in depth but on the surface and the relief looked like a tray packed with forms, presenting a jumbled appearance.

This art belonged to the Hinayana phase of Buddhism when the presence of Buddha was indicated symbolically by means of foot-prints, empty throne, *bodhi-tree*, *dharma-chakra* or *stupa*, etc. This art also effected a synthesis between the higher religion and the folk religion as represented by the popular divinities like the Yakshas, *nagas* and the *vrikshakas*, etc.

The earliest phase of the Sunga art is represented by the reliefs on the ground balustrade of Stupa 2 at Sanchi, which are executed in low and flat relief and look like sketched linear patterns. The next phase is provided by the reliefs on the gateways and the ground balustrade of the Bharhut Stupa which are accompanied by inscribed labels in Brahmi. The gateway posts are carved with figures of Yakshas, Yakshis and other semi-divine beings while the balustrade reliefs depict Jataka stories and scenes from the life of the Buddha in oblong, square, round and semi-round panels. The coping stone of the balustrade shows the flowing creeper design which binds together the dispersed reliefs in its endless meandering waves. A flowing linear rhythm inspired by vegetation enlivens majority of the figures and reliefs at Bharhut. This art, however, is primitive and is marked by rigid frontality and obsession for details which is carried to such extremes that an impression of the whole is difficult to get. Irrespective of anatomical accuracy, the folded hands and feet here are turned sideways and shown in their broadest parts.

The carvings on the Bodhgaya railings are in the Bharhut style but show an advance in technique and plastic effect. There is a more convincing grouping and the narrative reliefs are freed from unnecessary details. As a result, the compositions are less crowded and the figures move more naturally and freely and have softer contours and better animation. An advance is registered also in the representation of depth or the third dimension.

The carvings on the four gateways of the Great Stupa at Sanchi, executed around 50 B.C., mark the culmination of the Sunga-Satavahana art. The horizontal and vertical arrangement of the reliefs unfolds its fullest possibilities at Sanchi and leads to variegated and bewildering

compositions of epic grandeur and quality. There is an increase in the depth of the relief and the figures are presented at various angles with an amazing variety of attitudes and poses. The forms appear to burst forth from the stone and spread over the surface in endless masses producing dramatic compositions surging with life to the point of boisterous frenzy. The scenes of the War of the Relics best illustrate the dramatic quality of the reliefs. The human figures remain squat and sturdy but the contours are softer and mellifluous and the body appears as a lively, integrated union of single parts with gliding sinuousness and sure movement. The guardian figures and the Yaksha, surging with pent-up energies, move freely and the Yakshi-dryads with full curves and charming female contours stretch their limbs with easy grace. Equipped with an advanced technique and plastic vision, the Sanchi reliefs depict the contemporary life of India in all its varied aspects and moods. There is a faithful and loving portrayal of the aristocratic life at the court, the exciting life in the town, the modest life of the country side and the luxuriant vegetation of the forest and against such a varied background the edifying Buddhist stories are narrated in the simplest and most direct language. Although the artists are actuated by religious impulse, their main concern is the depiction of the worldly life and existence in its various manifestations. This early Indian art is a popular art, free alike from artificiality and idealism and is characterised by simple naturalism and transparent sincerity with a wide and universal appeal.

### VENGI SCHOOL

The Buddhist art of the Vengi School which started with Amaravati and Jaggayyapeta in *circa* 2nd century B.C. developed into a strong regional school with prolific and sustained artistic activity that reaches its height in the 2nd century A.D. at centres like Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Alluru, Gumadidurru and Goli. Coomaraswamy has aptly described the Vengi art as "the most voluptuous and delicate flower of Indian sculpture". Delicate and alluring female forms with full busts, heavy hips and serpentine suppleness are seen here to jostle one another. Delicately modelled bodies exhibit heavy heaving torsos supported on legs of unearthly slenderness. Human figure in this art replaces the plant and appears in all elasticity, exuberance and pliability. Scene after scene teems with tall and slender figures with sturdy torsos, in all poses and attitudes, sitting, standing, bending, flying, dancing and hovering with an amazing elasticity of movement. Although the purpose of this art is to narrate the legends of Buddhism in exhaustive details, "religion is being used as a pretext for singing a wildly rapturous paean of worldly life!" It is indeed the most voluptuous art. But compared to the unabashed lewdness of Mathura, the sensuousness of Amaravati seems to be more refined and restrained. The Vengi art expresses innocent joy of existence and love of life. Here

we have the wildest transports of joy alternating with violent outbursts of passion. Everything is dramatic, agitated and dynamic, amounting almost to boisterous frenzy. "It appears that Indian art had taken leave of this world with a tumultuous feast before deliberately entering the cold fields of spirituality".

Technically, each composition is knit together by rhythmic lines that portray the movements and directions of the figures. The movements slide from figure to figure and bind together the whole scene. The figures often entwine and interlace in spiral or parabolic movements. There is also a much greater mastery over depth and perspective and a greater command over rendering psychological states, ranging from passionate and ecstatic outbursts to benign and tender moods.

### Mathura Art

Although Mathura was a reputed centre of art right from the 2nd century B.C. onwards, its yield was most prolific under the rule of the Kushanas during the first two centuries of the Christian era. The greatest contribution of Mathura art was the evolution of the cult image which synchronised with the introduction of the image of the Buddha. With the anthropomorphic conception of the divinity, there was a revolutionary change in the artist's outlook of the importance of the human figure and its relation to the surrounding. The earlier concept of continuous narration in bas-reliefs is now discouraged and there emerges the image stela with supreme importance given to the central divinity attended by subsidiary figures as determined by iconographic formulations. The divine image is fashioned in the form of the familiar Yaksha primitive. The earliest Buddha figure, called Bodhisattva out of deference to the old scruples against the human representation of the Great Teacher, is fashioned in the form of the colossal Yaksha and is likewise characterised by massive burliness and earth-bound volume. The known early images of the Buddha, including some dated in year 2 and year 3 of Kanishka, are all executed in the likeness of the primitive Yakshas and stand with their burly massive form firmly planted on the pedestal, with their right hand raised shoulder-high in the *abhaya-mudra* and the clenched left hand kept on the waist holding the gathered ends of the *sanghati*. The entire gesture and the features including the broad shoulders and the sturdy masculine torso are suggestive of physical strength and energy. Thus the early Buddha image expresses only the mundane or physical aspect as that of a world conqueror and the open eyes and the smiling countenance do not suggest any spiritual introspection which was yet to come. In course of time the earthy massive form gets relaxed and grows supple with a gliding linear contour as expressed through both standing and seated Buddha images which undergo gradual iconographic and

artistic refinement. But despite these developments the Kushana Buddha figures remain earth-bound with no suggestion of supra-physical existence.

Related to the old Yakshi and *vrikthakas* formally and iconographically, the female figures from Mathura including those depicted on the Buddhist railings, have attained greater freedom of movement with increased plasticity and refinement of physical mass. The increased plasticity lead to alluring female forms of which the aim is frankly sensual and suggestively erotic.

### **Gandhara Art**

The Gandhara area to the north-west of India was a melting pot of foreign settlements ever since the 2nd century B.C. and nourished a hybrid culture that found expression in an eclectic School of art, prolific in output and contemporary with the Kushana art of Mathura. Its principal patrons were the Sakas and the Kushanas. Its technique was borrowed from Hellenistic standards as modified by elements such as Iranian and Scythian, while its themes were Indian and almost exclusively Buddhist.

The Gandhara School also produced the Buddha image, but the Gandhara Buddha plastically belong to an extraneous and hybrid art-tradition which follows the Indian tradition only in regard to iconography. The Mathura Buddha lacked spiritual expression, so did the Gandhara one. But the former, based on indigenous standard plastically and iconographically, expressed an Indian conception and was true to Indian ideals psychologically as well as culturally. The Gandhara figures and reliefs lacked spontaneity or emotional character that distinguished the art of Bharhut, Sanchi, Amaravati and Mathura. The Gandhara art was really an improvised art an exotic plant which had no root in the Indian soil. This eclectic art is an eastward expansion of Hellenism, as transformed by strong Iranian and Scythian elements and applied to Indian subjects. The Gandhara art is 'Indian and colonial from the Hellenistic point of view, and is Hellenistic and colonial from the Indian point of view'.

### **Gupta art**

The Gupta period witnessed the fulfilment and culmination of the earlier trends of the Indian art. Art under the Guptas attained a maturity and poise and an unsurpassed naturalness and felicity of expression. Its plasticity was derived from Mathura and its elegance from Amaravati, but the two underwent a transformation informed by a heightened aesthetic vision and intellectual consciousness. A

closer synthesis is established now between art and thought and between the external form and the inner spirit and art emerges as the conscious vehicle of the intellectual and spiritual urge.

The human figure becomes now the pivot of art and bends and sways, absorbing the rhythm of the creeper and the lotus stalk. The human frame of the divine image combines a disciplined body with a conquered mind. The human figure is elevated to a state of subtle spiritual experience and the body flows with the sap of life ever flowing within and the face is lit up with this experience and the eyes with dropping eye-lids now look within where every thing is at rest. Once this physical and mental discipline is achieved, there is no scope for a massive body or a nervous tension nor for elaborate drapery or jewellery which are indeed used sparingly with an eye on the plastic sensitiveness. While the earlier art was extrovert and concerned with mundane existence, this art is introvert and aims at visualising the superman endowed with the highest wisdom (*anuttara-jnana*) which is declared as life's supreme goal.

This was indeed a classical art marked by refinement or elegance, simplicity of expression and a dominant spiritual purpose. The artist now had achieved a mastery of technique and dealt with individual figures as well as complicated myths and narrative legends with equal ease and confidence. This art was characterised by a sensitively modelled and rarified body form and a serenity of expression which marks not only figures of gods but also of mortals. The sensitivity and luminosity of this art are best illustrated by the Buddha images. The Preaching Buddha from Sarnath with its spiritual expression, tranquil smile and serene contemplative mood indeed represents the highest triumph of Indian art.