Formal Analysis Writing

Standing Buddha, 3rd century CE, Schist

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Originally carved into a wall-probably of a monastery-in 3rd century CE in the ancient region of Gandhara, which is now northwest Pakistan and neighboring regions of Afghanistan[1], this Standing Buddha sculpture has been relocated halfway across the globe. It currently resides in the Fralin Museum of Art in Charlottesville, Virginia. The sculptor is unknown, but this is expected as these temples and monasteries were usually a community effort, so the artist would not have left any mark of their identity on the works they did for the monastery.

To preface this analysis, Gautama Buddha was once a wealthy prince who enjoyed all the comforts and luxuries that a royal life could offer. Initially, he was shielded from all kinds of suffering by his parents, however, on a journey outside his palace, he witnessed sickness, old age and death. Having never seen such suffering, these visuals bothered Gautama who eventually left his princedom to find his truth. He found his calling outside the walls of the castle, beyond his comfort zone, as he pursued a life of spirituality. He attained enlightenment and was awakened as result of this journey and in the process, he also helped thousands of others to live a more awakened life. He renounced all his worldly possessions to experience spiritual grounding and live his life with a higher purpose.

Although Buddha never personally visited Gandhara, it became the second holy land of Buddhism. A distinctive sculptural identity emerged from the region and flourished from the 1st to 5th centuries CE.[2] These sculptures were done mostly in stone and later in stucco. This particular sculpture is done on gray schist, a hard, medium grained metamorphic rock which usually has alternating striations of light and dark bands.

[1] Museum label
[2] Museum label

The sculpture shows Buddha standing on a platform decorated with flowers, leaves, and geometric designs. At the bottom of the sculpture, there is a smaller visual of two followers flanking a fire alter. This highlights the widespread and overwhelming support that Buddha had attained. While they signify the Buddha's vast following, it is noteworthy that the worshippers themselves are considerably smaller than Buddha himself and are not particularly striking. This suggests that the sculptor did not want to take away the focus from the Buddha himself, whose teachings are the foundation of Buddhism. This may have also been done intentionally to portray how the Buddha seems larger than life in comparison and was an elevated being compared to others. The fire flanked by his worshippers is symbolic to Buddhism as the Buddha is sometimes shown as a pillar of fire. This imagery links him to the ancient Hindu God of fire, Agni.[3]

There is, perhaps, a sense of serenity in his expression. We can discern no immediate emotion from his expression: eyebrows are calmly set, eyes are open, looking ahead, mouth neither smiling nor frowning, there is simple neutrality shining through. Even though Buddhism teaches its followers that suffering is inevitable, his serene and tranquil expression shows us that there is peace to be attained in the end, which acts to both reassure the audience, as well as give them hope to overcome their hurdles. Facing forward, we can assume he is looking ahead at his disciples or a group of worshippers to bless them with his outward turned palm. This was a popular way to depict the Buddha in works of art.

The right arm of the Buddha is missing but we can assume it was raised with his palm facing out, this is the gesture of granting freedom from fear, and is seen in several depictions of Buddha. It is one of the most well-known positions in works of art based on

[3] Museum label

Buddha. He is wearing a monastic robe that falls naturalistically over his body, posed in a gentle S-curve.[4] The garment covers both his shoulders and is worn over a lower garment that is tied at his waist. This choice of clothing calls to mind the toga of the ancient west.

The sculpture beautifully shows off the simplistic clothes worn by the ascetics of the time. It emphasizes the modesty and humility that Buddha was known for. The platform is the only adorned element in the sculpture and even though the Buddha was so well known, his clothes have no embroidery or embellishments. His bare feet are also significant, as they lay emphasis on the idea to respect mother earth, and the creatures that may be hurt by wearing slippers or other footwear. This too shows off the plainness and humble nature of the Buddha. Visually, the figure's right leg is slightly bent; this gives the illusion of the figure's lower body being off center with more pressure being applied on the left leg to keep the figure's upper body upright.

There is an immense attention to detail in this sculpture. Along with making the figure realistic, the sculptor has taken the time to render the robe to look like its flowing down the figure's body, showing us the creases of the loose cloth and the way it falls. Even the hair looks incredibly executed. However, with the realism there is also idealism. In making Buddha so much larger than the worshippers in the platform, there is an attempt to emphasize that the Buddha was a more enlightened soul, for he was one of the very few people who attained nirvana, and even though a lot of people followed him, not everyone was successful. He was there to guide his people. His presence impacted millions of people across the globe and was not restricted to those he met in person.

[4] Museum label

We can see symmetry playing a role in the way that the eyes are equidistant from the nose, and the way the nostrils are nearly identical, as well as the composition of the lips. His hair is in a bun at the top of his head in what seems to be a near perfect semi-circle, this shows exceptional skill on the part of the sculptor. There is also asymmetry with the ears, the left ear is seemingly more curved than the right, having more contours within the inner ear as well. The ears are also elongated, which is a Buddhist attribute in the art. The long ears are said to be a reminder that Gautama Buddha was once a prince who wore heavy earrings studded with precious stones and metals which stretched his ears dramatically, and now even as his earlobes remain empty because he renounced materialism, he still bears the signs of his past. It also makes the figure seem more human like rather than just a great man who attained nirvana, therefore making the Buddha's presence more relatable due to the similarities, reminding the audience that he too was an ordinary human being at first.

Buddha sculptures are an adornment in so many homes around the world because of the peace and calm that his form emanates. This tranquility needs to have been there in his human form for it to come out so strongly in his likeness. One could be anywhere in the museum, but this sculpture extends an invitation to slow down, take a deep breath and just be in the moment. The stillness around it draws one into an inner space for a few moments to experience the peace and calm.