

# Buddhist Art Styles and Cultural Exchange Along the Silk Road

By Martin Amster and Lier Chen

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Xuanzang  
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Winding through the deserts and high mountain passes of Central and Inner Asia,<sup>2</sup> the network of caravan routes collectively called the Silk Road linked China to the Middle East and Europe. From the second century BCE on, it was a major conduit for moving people, ideas, and goods. Monuments such as the towering fifty-three-meter (175 feet) high Buddha at Bamiyan in Afghanistan (destroyed by the Taliban in 2001) and the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas in northwest China bear witness both to the importance of the Silk Road and to a once flourishing Central Asian Buddhist culture.

The transmission of Buddhism from India to China (and from there to Korea and Japan) is perhaps the most significant of the cultural exchanges that took place along the Silk Road. Brought from India by missionaries and merchants, Buddhism was established in the oases of Central Asia by the first century BCE.<sup>3</sup> From there it traveled to China, again along the Silk Road. The earliest evidence for Buddhism in China dates from 65 CE and, by the year 148, the first translator of Buddhist texts into Chinese was probably in residence at the capital of Luoyang.<sup>4</sup>

Chinese Buddhists also began to make pilgrimages to India, in spite of hunger, thirst, bandits, wild animals, and some of the world's most difficult desert and mountain terrain.<sup>5</sup> The monk Xuanzang (circa 596–664)<sup>6</sup> was the most famous of these pilgrims. In 629 he set out alone for India to study, collect texts, and visit sacred sites. Before he started out, an experienced traveler warned him:

*The road to the West is dangerous and one has to cross the desert where there are demons and hot wind. Whoever encoun-*

*ters them cannot be spared from death. Even if you travel together with a large number of companions, you might go astray or be lost. How can you, reverend teacher, try to go all alone?*

*But the Master replied: "I started on my journey to the West for the purpose of seeking the great [Buddhist] Law. I will not return to the East before I reach India. Even if I die on the way, I won't regret it."<sup>7</sup>*

Xuanzang's pilgrimage took sixteen years. What kind of religious faith made him (and others) risk their lives?

The Buddhism that spread to East Asia was called Mahayana (Great Vehicle). It developed in India during the first centuries of the Common Era and later set down roots in China, Korea, Japan, Mongolia, and Tibet. In Mahayana doctrine, the Buddha and other sacred beings take on god-like qualities. Rather than being an earthly human teacher, the Buddha is regarded as an eternal being who is the embodiment of universal and cosmic truth, who is neither born nor dies but lives from eternity to eternity.<sup>8</sup>

Also central to Mahayana belief are bodhisattvas (*bodhi* is wisdom, *sattva* is being), beings who remain in the world, delaying their entrance into Nirvana in order to help others reach enlightenment. Bodhisattvas are depicted wearing worldly robes and elaborate ornaments, said to symbolize this connection to the material world.

Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other sacred personages have the power to answer prayers and save all living things from suffering. This doctrine of universal salvation is central to Mahayana Buddhism's appeal: It was no coincidence that Buddhism became part of Chinese culture during a particularly violent and unsettled historical period. Between the fall of the Han dynasty in 220 and reunification under the Sui in 589, China was politically divided and plagued by warfare, famine, and disease.<sup>9</sup>

The arts are central to the transmission of the Mahayana Buddhist message. Images were created according to elaborate systems of proportion and made sacred through ritual. New statues were consecrated in ceremonies where the pupils of the eyes were painted in; relics, scriptures, magic spells, or textile models of human organs would be put within special hollowed-out places. All this served to endow images with sacred life and power.<sup>10</sup>



**FIGURE 1:** *Colossal Buddha*, Bamiyan, Afghanistan. Fourth to fifth centuries. 53 m. (175 ft.) high.

Art was important to Buddhist religious life. It was not only part of ritual and worship, but also served to transmit religious ideas, design motifs, and artistic styles between cultures.

Fifty-three meters (175 feet) high, the colossal Buddha at Bamiyan (fig. 1)<sup>11</sup> is hardly portable, yet it played a role in the diffusion of the Buddha image throughout East Asia. It was the model for Buddha figures in both China and Japan.<sup>12</sup> Its great size (the dot on the right foot is a person) had a tremendous effect on travelers, and it's possible that they took smaller reproductions back with them to China.

Although the Bamiyan Buddha didn't travel, small objects like this portable altar (fig. 2)<sup>13</sup> might have been transported by the faithful over long distances. It was perhaps the kind of object a Silk Road merchant would carry in his baggage.

Another kind of portable art is this votive scroll (fig. 3). "Votive" means to express a vow or a wish. Votive objects are offered to gods or saints as an expression of thanks, or to ask for a favor or blessing. They're a common part of religious life in many cultures, past and present.

These votive images were created with a wooden stamp. The owner demonstrated his devotion by making repeated impressions of the Bodhisattva: the very process of stamping was a devotional act whereby the doer accumulated merit. Sheets of paper filled with rows of images were pasted together to make scrolls and often placed in shrines. The portability of such stamps meant they could transmit image types and motifs.

This scroll is from Dunhuang in northwest China, where two branches of the Silk Road came together after circling the fierce Taklamakan desert. Dunhuang was one of the main points of entry for Buddhist missionaries and monks going from Central Asia to China.<sup>14</sup>



**FIGURE 2:** *Bronze Buddhist Altar*. Chinese, circa 505 CE. Bronze, 13.7 cm. (5 3/8 in.) high. Seattle Museum of Art.



**FIGURE 3:** *Votive Images of a Bodhisattva*. Tang dynasty (618–907), 800–899 CE. From Dunhuang, ink on paper, 15.4 cm. high, 143.5 cm. wide (6 by 56 in.). British Museum.



**FIGURE 4:** Standing Buddha. India, Gupta period (circa 319 to 500). Mottled red sandstone, 85.5 cm. (33 11/16 in.) high. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



**FIGURE 5:** Maitreya, Northern Wei (386–534). Dated 486. Gilt bronze, 1.40 m. (4 ft. 7 in.) high. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Over the centuries, Indian culture exerted varying degrees of influence on Chinese Buddhist art. Early Chinese Buddha images relied heavily on Indian prototypes, especially for the appearance of the face, robes, and body. During periods of active exchange, travelers, texts, and sacred objects flowed freely into China. By contrast, when the Silk Routes were unsafe, Chinese artistic styles developed more independently. By the twelfth century, when Buddhism had ceased to exist as an organized religion in India, this influence came to an end. The four images on these pages show how Indian influence varied over time.

Figure 4 is an example of Gupta sculpture, “the classic creation of Buddhism in India, [that] established the standard type of the Buddha image . . . Whenever one thinks of the Buddha image one thinks of the Gupta type or its derivatives.”<sup>15</sup>

Specific features of the Buddha image (called *lakshanas* in Sanskrit) indicated his wisdom (the circular bump on top of the head) or nobility (the long earlobes). Hand gestures called *mudras* symbolize aspects of the Buddha’s teaching: meditation, fearlessness, debate, warding off evil, prayer, teaching.<sup>16</sup>

Since the Buddha was a spiritually perfect being, he was given an ideal physique. Also, the shape of the eyebrows (like an archer’s drawn bow) or the eyes (like lotus petals) conformed to specific canons of beauty. Some features were taken from stories about the Buddha. The tight curls on the head, for instance, were said by some to be snails that climbed up to shield him from the sun during meditation.

Another goal sought by Indian craftsmen was to convey the idea of *prana* or “breath.” This breath was a vital force that animated the entire body. To convey this, South Asian sculptors and painters made full-bodied, fleshy figures that looked as if their skins were filled with air. To better show this, the thin robes cling to the body, revealing the skin underneath. This is sometimes called the “wet look.”

This classic style “was exported in two main directions—to Indonesia, and through Central Asia to the Far East.”<sup>17</sup> The standing Maitreya Buddha (Northern Wei, 386–534, fig. 5)<sup>18</sup> is an example of this style as interpreted by Chinese craftsmen during the fifth century, a time when north China was ruled by a non-Chinese



**FIGURE 6:** Maitreya Altarpiece. Northern Wei dynasty (386–534). Dated 524.  
Bronze. 76.9 cm. (30 1/4 in.) high.  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



**FIGURE 7:** Vairocana Buddha, Tang dynasty (618–907), circa 670–680.  
Stone, 15 m. (50 ft.) high.  
Longmen Caves, Henan province, China.



**FIGURE 7A:** Detail of the Longmen Vairocana.

people called the Tuoba. Like the Gupta sculpture in figure 4, it has a fleshy body, revealed and enhanced by the clinging robes. It also has the bump on top of the head and the elongated earlobes, marks of the Buddha's wisdom and nobility.

A uniquely Chinese style of Buddhist art (fig. 6) also developed during the Northern Wei. Such figures are distinctive for their slender proportions and linear design. The fluttering scarf-like drapery of this Maitreya figure seems in constant motion. There's almost no sense of a body underneath. During Northern Wei many of the Buddhist faithful awaited Maitreya's coming to earth and the age of peace it would bring.

A more three dimensional Indian style developed in sixth century China and flourished during the Tang dynasty (618–907). This was in part because connections between China and Central Asia over the Silk Road had reached a high point during Tang. The body of the huge Vairocana Buddha<sup>19</sup> from the Longmen Caves<sup>20</sup> (fig. 7) was no longer lost in drapery. It appears to wear its robes, rather than disappear beneath them. The body is full, solid, and fleshy. Note the care taken to model the chin and the folds in the Buddha's neck (fig. 7a).

## FOUR STUDENT ACTIVITIES

Today, since much of the world is linked by air travel, telephone, television, the Internet, and global marketing, cultural exchange seems, at least on the surface, to be instantaneous and ongoing. By contrast, pre-modern cultural exchange took long periods of time and advanced in slow stages. On the Silk Road it was propelled by horse, camel, and human footsteps.

### A. Document-Based Questions

This exercise is designed to help students understand visual artifacts as both evidence of the past and as transmitters of ideas and artistic styles.

Distribute copies of figures 1, 2, and 3. Have students answer the following questions with respect to all three.

- What might attract a Silk Road traveler to this Buddha?
- Can you guess the object's purpose or use?
- Considering the size, material, and medium, could you list at least one modern-day counterpart?
- How might this object have contributed to cultural diffusion? Consider size, portability, purpose.

### B. Activity: Creating a Buddhist Object

This requires students to think about how images change as they move from one culture to another.

Divide the class into groups. Each group is given one of the three figures, 1, 2, or 3. Make sure that students understand the differing roles each played in the diffusion of Buddhism and Buddhist art styles along the Silk Road. Students will then create a contemporary version of the artifact. They must keep in mind that some parts of the objects—haloes (figs. 2, 3), hand gestures (fig. 3)—are constants. Challenge them to make a Buddha that reflects a contemporary style or look (hip hop, for instance), but retains the serious and reverential character that we associate with religious art.

### C. Activity: Modern Objects and Cultural Diffusion

As a debriefing activity, have students select a modern-day artwork, object, or monument that can be compared to figures 1, 2, or 3. It need not be religious: the Statue of Liberty, for example, might be a good choice. It need not be statuary—it could be anything that represents some aspect of reproducible culture that can be passed on to others: postcards, compact discs, and so forth. Students should

- Identify the ideas it symbolizes or represents;
- Indicate how it is able to spread these ideas;
- Explain how these ideas might change in meaning when transported to another culture.

### D. Activity: Buddha Images, Known and Unknown

Distribute reproductions of figures 4, 6, and 7. Teacher and class will discuss cultural exchange over the Silk Road and the characteristics of each image—place of origin, date, materials, size, and the distinguishing marks of the Buddha. The teacher then focuses on matters of sculptural style. Some suggested questions are:

#### Figure 4

- What emotion does the face of the Buddha convey?
- What does the “wet look” enable the sculptor to show?
- Can you see bones and muscles beneath the skin of this figure?

#### Figure 6

- How do you know this figure is a Buddha?
- Do the folds of the Buddha's clothing resemble real cloth?

#### Figure 7



FIGURE A: Unidentified Comparison

Seated Buddha/China, early eighth century, Tang dynasty (618–907)/20 cm. (8 in.) high/Metropolitan Museum of Art/Technique: Gilt bronze/Matches figure 7.

- Compared to figure 6, what is the relation between the Buddha's clothing and the body it covers?
- How does this sculpture differ from the “wet look” of figure 4?

Next, the class is divided into groups of three. Each group receives the three unidentified figures (A, B, C). The groups identify the unknown images by comparison with those already discussed and identified. Each group presents their results. The teacher distributes a handout with the correct identifications.

Finally, the teacher distributes figure 5 and asks the class to group it with the Buddha (or Buddhas) it most closely matches in style. He or she then tells the class it's Chinese. Questions for discussion:

- Compare figures 5 and 6. Which figure is influenced by India? Explain.
- What features of figure 6 mark it as not being influenced by Indian art?

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**FIGURE B. Unidentified Comparison**  
Maitreya Altarpiece, dated 537/China, Eastern Wei dynasty (534–549)/119 cm. (4 ft.) high/Cleveland Museum of Art/Technique: Stone carving/Matches figure 6.



**FIGURE C. Unidentified Comparison**  
Seated Buddha/Mathura, third century, India/Mottled red sandstone; 63 cm. (25 in.) high/Cleveland Museum of Art/Technique: Stone carving/Matches figure 4.

Sickman, Laurence, and Soper, Alexander. *The Art and Architecture of China*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1956.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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#### NOTES

1. To reserve a free copy, please contact: mamster@chinainstitute.org.
2. Central Asia comprises the Chinese autonomous region of Xinjiang and Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, as well as northern Afghanistan. Inner Asia is more inclusive, and includes Central Asia, Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, southern Siberia, and Tibet.
3. Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 20.
4. Ch'en, 33, 43.
5. See NASA's "Visible Earth" (<http://visibleearth.nasa.gov>) for extraordinary satellite color photos of Inner and Central Asia.
6. Xuanzang's journey gradually became the stuff of legend. One of the most popular classical Chinese novels, the sixteenth century *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji*), is based on his story. Through Arthur Waley's abridged translation, *Monkey* (Grove Press, 1943), *Journey to the West* has become a classic of world literature. Today, it also lives through cartoons, comics, action figures, and the Internet.

7. Samuel Beal, *Si-Yu-Ki. Buddhist Records of the Western World*. 2 vols (Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint, 1969), 17.
8. Ch'en, 13.
9. The Daoist religion, China's indigenous faith, also became widespread during the same period.
10. Ghose, 121; Nickel, 23–25.
11. Destroyed by the Taliban in March, 2001. For a vivid computer-generated model of the statue, see: [http://www.photogrammetry.ethz.ch/research/bamiyan/reconstruction\\_metric/manual.html](http://www.photogrammetry.ethz.ch/research/bamiyan/reconstruction_metric/manual.html).
12. Lee, Sherman E., *A History of Far Eastern Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1973), 133.
13. The Chinese writing on the base records the date it was made and the name of the craftsman.
14. For more on Dunhuang, see <http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/silkroad/cities/china/dh/dh.html>.
15. Lee, 106.
16. For *mudras*, see [www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net)
17. Lee, 106.
18. Maitreya is the Buddha of the future.
19. Vairocana means Illuminating One. While Shakyamuni is the historical Buddha, Vairocana represents his supreme cosmic aspect.
20. The Longmen caves are located about ten miles south of the city of Luoyang, Henan province, China.

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**MARTIN AMSTER** has worked for the Committee on Asia and the Middle East at Columbia University and, since 2000, been Program Coordinator for Curriculum at China Institute. His field of interest is early Chinese thought.

**LIER CHEN** is a graduate of Wesleyan University with a major in history. She has been working for the Teach China program of China Institute since July 2002. Her interests include contemporary Chinese art, film, and cultures and peoples of the Silk Road.

The Silk Road was an important route not just for physical goods but for ideas as well, and it had a major impact on the spread of Buddhism through Central Asia. As the Chinese influence increased in the 6th century, Buddhist art in the area started mixing Chinese elements with the prevailing Indo-Persian style. By the 7th century, all the small kingdoms in the Tarim Basin were Buddhist and used Sanskrit for religious purposes. By the mid-600s, Kucha had emerged as a leading centre of the version of Buddhism known as Hinayana Buddhism. Along the southern route of the Silk Road, Mahayana Buddhism was more common, with Khotan and Yarkand being two notable examples. Buddhism among the nomadic steppe people.