

Galerie Hioco

A fascinating Gandhāran frieze (P665)



What do we like in this sculpture?

- It is an absolutely emblematic work of this Greco-Buddhist art of Gandhāra! An essential scene of Buddhism even appears there: the birth of the Buddha.
- Its animated and dynamic representations: the multiplication of the scenes and characters gives to see an incredibly rich and lively narration!
- Its form! Do you see how this frieze is curved? This shows that it decorated the base or rounded drum of a stūpa.

I. Detailed description

Frieze depicting the birth of the Buddha (P665)

Schist

Ancient province of Gandhāra

3rd-4th century

D. 19 x 46 cm or 7 3/8 x 18 1/8 in

An iconic scene in the life of the Śākyamuni Buddha: his birth

It is in the region of Gandhāra that the iconography of the Buddha in human form is gradually established. The Gandhāran school emphasizes the last existence of the historical Buddha, as well as his previous lives or jātaka. It develops a syncretic style, which is notably evident in the use of pilasters and columns surmounted by Hellenistic-style capitals with acanthus motifs, a device well known to the Greeks that allows the different moments of a narrative to be divided, as is the case here. The most important scene in this frieze is also easily identifiable: it is the birth of Śākyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha. In keeping with classical iconography, Queen Māyā - the Buddha's mother - is depicted in Lumbinī, grasping a branch of the śāl tree with her right hand. From her flank is born the future Buddha, gathered in a cloth stretched by Indra. On the right, Mahāprajāpatī supports her sister, and gently touches her belly, as if to soothe her.

An undeniable Hellenistic heritage, but not only

This scene of the Buddha's birth is in itself a concentration of various influences: the clothes of the figures show Hellenistic and Roman stylistic influence, sometimes draped in broad clothes with quilted folds reminiscent of the toga or himation, sometimes the muscular bust left exposed and covered with jewels, then reminiscent of the nomadic ancestry of the Kuṣāṇ tribes (Guishuang, the Yuezhi tribe that led to the term Kuṣāṇ). The elaborate headdresses and heavy earrings, for their part, are typically Indian. The scene on the right is more enigmatic, perhaps depicting two beings who have come to celebrate the birth of the Buddha or the past and future miracles of the Blessed One. They are on either side of a table that we can believe is filled with modaka, small Indian pastries, although it is difficult to say for sure. Above, appear several Buddha worshipped by orants, each time separated by columns. This stylistic cosmopolitanism is a fortunate characteristic of Gandhāra art; the dual influence of classical Mediterranean and Indian sculpture gives this work its charm by endowing it with a strong aesthetic and a great historicity.

The art of narration in the region of Gandhāra

Finally, it is interesting to note the curved shape of this frieze: this indicates that it decorated a stūpa. The Gandhāran monasteries indeed had two types of areas: courtyards accessible to devotees and crowded with all sorts of ex-voto monuments, such as reliquary tumuli (*stūpa*) and chapels, and beyond that an area reserved only for monks. In the public areas, the bases of the *stūpa*, the door and window surrounds, the plinths and sometimes even the risers of the stairs bore numerous reliefs, juxtaposing decorative motifs and apologetic narrative scenes. This is the case with this frieze, which was read from right to left according to the traditional practice of circumambulation (consisting of turning ritually around the sacred object, keeping it on the right, here the stūpa).

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II. Image of the piece – front view



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III. Image of the piece – left three-quarter view



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IV. Image of the piece – back view



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V. Image of the piece – right three-quarter view



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VI. Images of the piece – profile views



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VII. Images of the piece – detail views

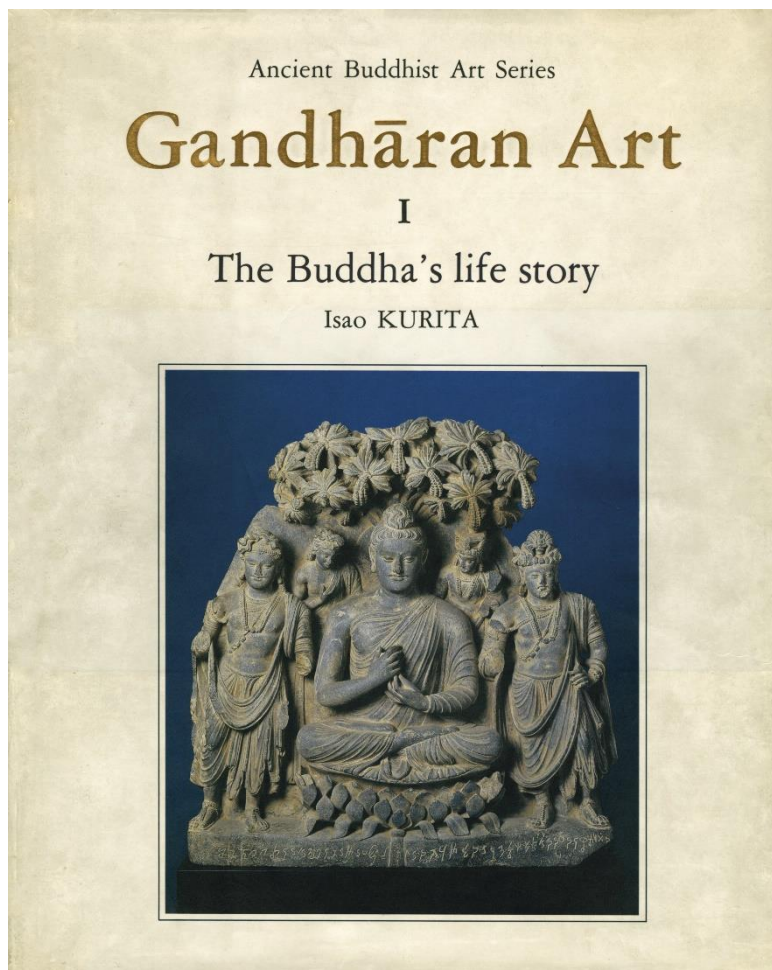


VIII. Provenance: in all transparency!

. This piece comes from a private Japanese collection and was published in Volume 1 (1988) of *Gandhāran Art* written by Isao Kurita (reproduced below).

. We are always very cautious and diligent about the provenance of the artworks we offer. Ensuring the seriousness and reliability of the information given by the former owners is one of our priorities and we then guarantee this origin by engaging our responsibility.

. In order to reinforce this guarantee, we systematically verify that these artworks have not been registered as missing or stolen. As Interpol has granted us the right to directly consult their database of stolen or reported items, we verify by ourselves and issue a certificate attesting to this.



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38



39



40



41

38/マーヤー夫人の里帰り(右), 誕生(左)
Gray schist, h.12cm
From Malakand
Private collection Japan

39/マーヤー夫人の里帰り(右), 誕生(左)
Gray schist, h.14cm, w.40cm
Private collection Japan



42



43

40/マーヤー夫人の里帰り(右), 誕生(中),
灌水(左)
Gray schist, h.12cm
From Malakand
Private collection Japan

41/ルンビニー園での休憩(右), 誕生(左)
Gray schist, h.24cm
Private collection Japan

42/太子の誕生(部分)
Stucco
Guimet Museum

43/誕生
Stucco, h.11.5cm, w.18.5cm
From Takht-i-Bahai
Peshawar Museum, No.1242

IX. Condition report: our scientific approach

This beautiful Gandhāran frieze is made of schist, dated from circa 3rd-4th century and measures 19 cm high and 46 cm long (or 7 ½ x 18 ½ in). The panel is curved, both front and rear. Some losses are evident: the upper right corner is missing, as is the lower left corner, which extends into the scene of the Buddha's birth. Other small asperities are to be seen on the whole carved surface. All these breaks are old as evidenced by their weathered surfaces. The stone is somewhat coarse-grained and as a consequence, there is a limit to the fineness of details that can be rendered in it. The small scale of the figures reaches this limit. However, the details are well preserved. Most of the sculpted surface has heavy limewash and soil residues bound to it. This phenomenon is probably explained by a period of burial of the sculpture in the ground. This condition appears consistent with schist carvings of the Gandhāran period. No restoration was evidenced.

Please note that since we are not conservators or restorers, it must be understood that any condition report we made is a subjective qualified opinion, even if we do our best efforts. Prospective buyers should inspect the piece to satisfy themselves as to condition.

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X. Comparable museum artwork – The British Museum

A panel depicting the Birth of the Buddha (H. 14 cm or 5 ½ in) belonging to the collections of the British Museum in London (1880.62):

The British
Museum

School/style

Gandhara School

Cultures/periods

Kushan

Production date

2ndC-3rdC

Production place

Made in: Gandhara (Pakistan)

Asia: South Asia: Pakistan: Gandhara
(Pakistan)



XI. Our guarantees: for a serene acquisition!

- More photos will be sent to you on request.
- In case of purchase, we will establish an invoice that you can pay by bank transfer.
- You will receive our certificate of authenticity with the photo of the artwork, its detailed description and the mention of the provenance.
- We will define together the shipping modalities and we will take care of all customs formalities if you live outside of France.
- If you do not like the piece, we give you the possibility to return it to us and we will assist you with the resulting terms and conditions.