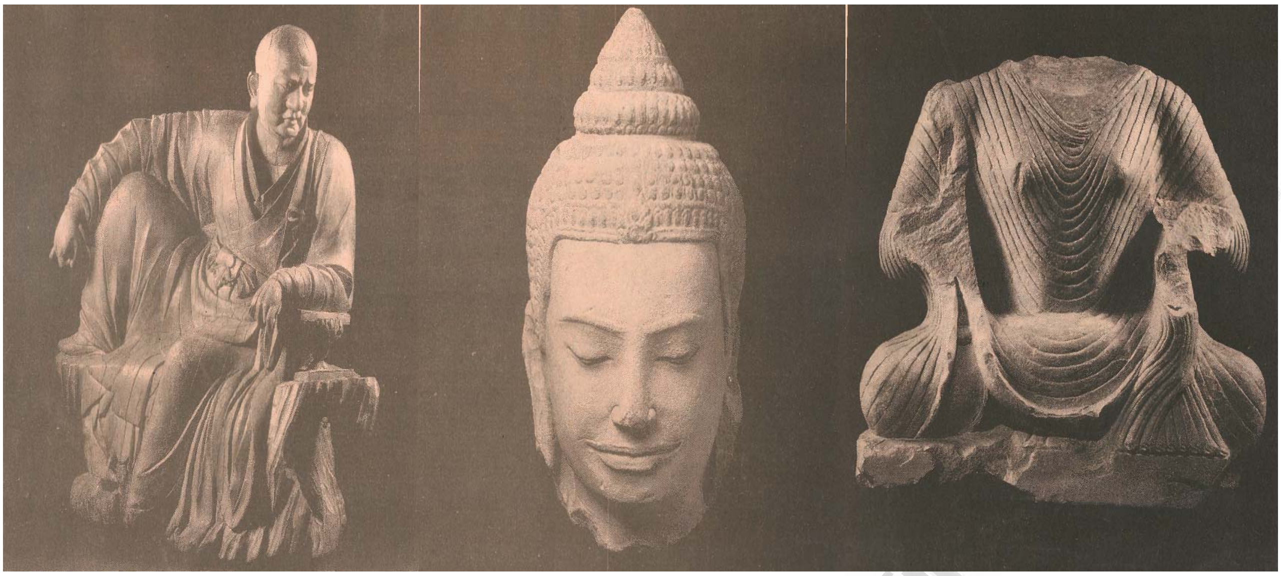
Fine figures



The fullness of volume, the integration of forms, the internalisation of thought, the remoteness of the form from our own iconography both in terms of racial type and emotion (or lack of it).

What does this head (above, centre), stuck from the body by vandals or fortune-hunters, tell us about itself or ourselves? Like Egyptian and Khmer sculpture - for even though it was made in Thailand this is a Khmer head it is codified, idealised, but also capable of being a likeness.

What makes this such an engaging piece of sculpture? It is hieratic and symmetrical; there is a relation between surface drawing and fullness of form; there is a stylisation and repetition of the decorative treatment in the hair, and of course the eyes and the smile.

This is material but dematerialised, human but perfected, and now in its fragile state a memoryof a distant and unapproachable "otherculture". What could it mean and how did this culture arise? That is what the Robert H N Ho Foundation allows us to see in the four rooms of a wonderful new gallery at the Victoria & Albert Museum devoted to Buddhist sculpture.

Buddhism teaches utter renunciation of the world but has been supported by those most concerned by worldly matters - kings and emperors, who endowed it to save their souls and allowed it to produce a wealth of imagery. And it has been practised by the merchants who carried the word across the world, by the northern route through Afghanistan, on the Silk Road to Xian and later on the southern route by ship from the coast of what is now Tamil Nadu to Fuhan and Java.

Buddhism embraced both the tenets and cosmology of Hinduism and the rites of an ancient central Asian Shamanism.' This was the greater vehicle or Mahayana school -that travelled north and east to Tibet, China, Korea and Japan. Although it started as a philosophy suspicious of the image, within 500 years of the Sakyamuni's death Buddhism was responsible for an explosion of imagery.

An early work in this extraordinary collection of pieces from the V&A is a carving in red limestone from Mathura which indicates an early avoidance of idol-making. It depicts in low relief an empty throne supporting a wheel with two crouching figures peeking suspiciously over the back of it. It illustrates the essential challenge of Buddhist iconography - how do you make an image that deals with an escape from the world of things, with detachment, with the absence of action, thought, feeling?

The central image of the Buddha attaining enlightenment is of a body which, while having the attributes of this world, is no longer in this world. It is a composite idea, made up of strict codes of proportion and stance that derive from abstract canons laid down in the first century (to be seen and admired in Ajanta and Ellora). We can see it in the extraordinary early-3rd-century hermaphroditic seated Buddha, where the lines or folds of the Buddha's robes are less ahout the description of cloth than a way of evoking energy. The drapery reveals as much as it conceals, skin or the clothing is simply a, membrane that allows something to become visible but is not a guarantee of substance. It subtly suggests the doctrine of Maya, the illusion attached to the appearance of things.

This theme is evoked nowhere more beautifully than in the 10th-century standing figure from South India, a sexless gilded standing Buddha with broad shoulders and a symmetrical pose which betrays no sensuality or potential movement, but is totally arresting. The Abhaya mudra evokes sculpture's ability to stop you as witness in your movement through space and consider time and its passing. This is the central doctrine of Buddhism: desire binds us to the physical world because we do not understand that all things change and that transience is the only permanent state. The acceptance in an image like this - of the fundamental stillness of sculpture and its ability to stop life in its tracks - is what makes the greatest Buddhist images so potent but not overpowering. These pure images become an invitation to another form of existence, and evoke the core of Buddhist practice dealing with time, space and consciousness.

Can sculpture, that is after all a thing in the world, in its stillness and silence, and often made of precious materials, communicate the need for detachment?

Let's look at the attitude to the body. The body is seen as a vessel, a spaceship that carries the mind. The emphasis is on being not doing, states of mind not physical actions. The body positions are defined in mudras for example the Dharmachakra mudra of teaching, the Dhyana mudra of meditation, the Bhumisparsha mudra of touching the earth in witness, and the one we know, the Abhaya mudra of reassurance, which is the raised hand with palm facing outwards.

The most important quality is the way that the serenity of the body is mirrored by facial expression, particularly the smile. What is it that stops the Buddha's smile from being smug? It's a feature that allows the severity of many of the core images of the meditating Buddha to be transformed. We can see it in the 4th-century Gandhara meditating Buddha, the 6th-century Chinese teaching Buddha from the Xiangtangshan caves and in the Lopburi head from Thailand; severity touched by sweetness. In the Buddha's smile is compassion for all living beings, a deep empathy with the activity of all life and the suffering that unites it. There is a common criticism of Buddhism that it proposes selfish detachment, but in the constant smile of a sculptural image is the communication of deep and complicit concern. The most potent images from the vast array of styles and local accents carry this feeling.

The other carrier of meaning is the eyes, either looking straight forward or cast down, almost closed. In all three of our examples there is a sense that the image, although an object, contains a place no longer blinded by the world of appearances that arises mind moment after mind moment.

The absolute conventions and deep abstraction that possessed Buddhist art from early on can be explained by an early fable about Uddiyana, King of Vatsa. He was a contemporary and ardent follower of Buddha and had a sandalwood image carved when the Buddha disappeared to preach to celestial beings. This standing Uddiyana Buddha, with right hand raised in the Abhaya mudra of reassurance, is the beginning of a convention within Buddhist iconography that images of the Buddha should never change. And that merit accrues to those who make the perfect copy of this, the first copy of the Buddha's body.

The story of Buddhism is a battle -between the idea of an original image of an absent presence that evokes aestheticism and simplicity, and the power of animist, Vedic and Hindu practice that wanted to evolve and connect it with long-standing traditions of worship. One of the later works in the galleries is of the Luohan. As the spread of Mahayana Buddhism travelled east it became increasingly devotional, fixating on the possibility of a heaven in the west presided over by Amitabha the Celestial Buddha of Light.

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These ideas are perhaps the furthest from the Buddha's instance on the importance of practice over worship. The reassertion of the individual right to self-determination in a spiritual sense is carried by the late flowering of sculptures of arhats, or Buddhist saints. A 14th-century image from China is a radical departure from the highly conventionalised images of a meditating Buddha: a realistic portrait of an individual saint. Here is the perplexity of a man who has renounced the world but not yet achieved nirvana. The pose in this image is a relaxed meditation on the journey of image-making that connects through Gandhara with echoes of the Roman and Etruscan tomb sculptures put to a very different purpose; far from participating in some bacchanal or feast, the monk stares blindly into space uncertain of his place within it.

The first room in the new galleries contains Gandharan pieces which show the life of the Buddha. The later three rooms show the unfolding of the greater and lesser vehicles across India, Sri Lanka, the Himalayas, Burma, Indonesia, Thailand, China and Japan. Many of the greatest Buddhist works are site-specific, from the earliest caves at Ajanta to the colossi of Bamian, Polon-naruwa or Longmen. The works in the Robert Ho Foundation Gallery have become portable and derive from very different context - caves, stupas and temple shrines and would have been seen against a backdrop of walls and altars. Here, seen in natural light and in a secular setting, we are aware of them as three-dimensional objects (although designed only to be seen from the front), which makes us more aware of the drawing of their silhouettes.

This gallery is an important addition to the museum and a significant step in communicating with and understanding the history of Buddhism. There is no question that the esoteric schools in Tibet, China and Japan produced the most spectacular art and Hinayana schools some of the most spiritual. Now, released from their ritual contexts, they speak to us directly of change and the way we move within it.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, April 25 e 26 2009, Life & Arts, p. 10.

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