

Contact: Elaine Merguerian, 212-327-9271 or elainem@asiasociety.org

ASIA SOCIETY PRESENTS EXHIBITION OF BUDDHIST GANDHARAN ART ON RARE LOAN FROM PAKISTAN

MOST WORKS ARE ON FIRST-TIME VIEW IN THE UNITED STATES

FIRST EXHIBITION OF ITS KIND IN FIFTY YEARS

The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan: Art of Gandhara

Asia Society Museum, New York

March through May, 2011



Standing Bodhisattva Maitreya. Pakistan. 3rd–4th century CE. Gray schist. H. 39 3/8 x W. 15 3/16 x D. 5 1/2 in. (100 x 38.5 x 14 cm). Central Museum, Lahore.

Asia Society Museum presents an exhibition of spectacular Buddhist sculptures, architectural reliefs and works of gold and bronze from the Gandhara region of Pakistan, most never exhibited before in the United States. These artworks show the rich artistic heritage of Gandhara as a geographical and historic region and as a particular style of art. *The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan: Art of Gandhara* reveals the complex cultural influences—from Scytho-Parthian to Greco-Roman traditions—that fed the extraordinary artistic production of this region from the first century B.C.E. through the fifth century C.E.

“Despite today’s images of Pakistan as a place of violent extremism, the region has an ancient tradition of tolerance and pluralism as evidenced by the survival of these spectacular examples of Gandharan art,” says Melissa Chiu, Asia Society Museum Director and Vice President, Global Art Programs. “Through this exhibition, Asia Society aims to provide new contexts for looking at the arts, culture and society of Pakistan today, in keeping with our long history of programming about and engagement with Pakistan and

following our 2009 exhibition *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*.”

At its height, Gandhara—whose center was situated in present-day Peshawar in northwest Pakistan—encompassed Bamiyan in Afghanistan, Bactria, the Hindu Kush, and the Punjab region of northwest India. The majority of Gandharan art known today is Buddhist in origin. Buddhism reached Gandhara as early as the third century B.C.E., and began to flourish in the first century C.E. as Silk Road trade and cross-cultural connections from the Mediterranean to China fostered its spread.

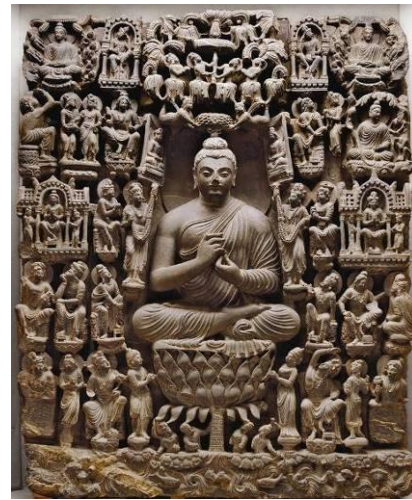
The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan: Art of Gandhara is the first exhibition to bring works of Gandharan art from Pakistan to the United States since Asia Society’s groundbreaking exhibition

of Gandharan sculpture in 1960. The majority of works in the exhibition are on loan from the National Museum in Karachi and Central Museum in Lahore. In addition to loans from Pakistan, comparative works, both eastern and western, that illuminate the Greco-Roman and Scytho-Parthian influences on Gandharan art are included from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Asia Society Museum, and private collections in the United States. The display is organized by Adriana Proser, Asia Society Museum's John H. Foster Curator for Traditional Asian Art.

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully-illustrated 196-page catalogue published by Asia Society in association with the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik in Bonn, Germany. The book includes full-color photography and essays by foremost scholars in the field, including Christian Luczanits and Michael Jansen.

Buddhism and Gandharan art

Buddhism and Buddhist art flourished in the region between the second and fourth centuries C.E. under Kushan rule. The Kushans were a people from the East Asian steppes who invaded Bactria and then conquered the northwest of India and what is today Pakistan. While they were not initially followers of Buddhism, their second-century king, Kanishka, is considered one of history's greatest imperial patrons and supporters of Buddhism. For centuries after the decline of the Kushans, Gandhara remained a stronghold of Buddhism. Gandhara was also a region of major importance for the development of images of the Buddha and his life, as well as for its novel concept of bodhisattvas, which eventually became an essential component of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition that spread to East Asia.



Vision of a Buddha Paradise. Pakistan. 4th century CE. Light gray schist. H. 46 7/8 x W. 38 3/16 x D. 11 in. (119 x 97 x 28 cm). Central Museum, Lahore. Photos by Peter Oszwald, © Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn.

Exhibition organization



So-called winged Aphrodite leaning against a pillar. Pakistan. 1st century CE. Gold. H. 2 1/2 in. (6.3 cm). National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi.

The exhibition is organized into three thematic sections. "Classical Connections" examines early connections with the classical world and associated imagery, in contrast to that of Indian Buddhist art. The influence of Greco-Roman culture in the region began with its conquest by Alexander the Great, although the Indo-Greeks who occupied Gandhara around 180 B.C.E. were responsible for the western, Hellenistic influence evident in early Gandharan works. Motifs from Greek mythology and western architectural elements such as Corinthian capitals can be identified in the works on view.

"Narratives and Architectural Context" examines the combination of local characteristics with elements derived from both Indian and western precedents that is expressed in Gandharan architecture. For example, the exhibition considers a unique type of stupa developed in Gandharan art that is characterized by an elevated drum resting on a square podium. This section also includes narrative reliefs depicting scenes from the life of the historical Buddha that adorned stupas and other

architectural settings. These narratives show how artists from Gandhara highlighted the linear unfolding of events in scenes from the Buddha's life, in contrast to the conflated depictions favored by North Indian artists.

A third section of the exhibition, “Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,” explores the diverse visual imagery of Buddhas and bodhisattvas in Gandhara and how this relates to the multi-faceted nature of Buddhism in the region. A highlight of the exhibition, the so-called Mohammed Nari stele, is included in this section. This visually stunning and complex stone carving presents a grand vision of a Buddha within his realm of influence.

Exhibition lenders and funding credits

Critical support for *The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan: Art of Gandhara* comes from our lead sponsor, the Partridge Foundation, a John and Polly Guth Charitable Fund.

Related programs

Asia Society will present a series of public programs in conjunction with the exhibition to provide additional background and context on Gandharan art and Pakistan, including programs that examine the country’s contemporary culture, politics and civil society. Christian Luczanits, an expert on Gandharan art, will give a lecture on the evening of March 17. On Saturday, April 30, at 4:00 p.m., poet Hasina Gul will read at the launch of a new anthology of modern poetry of Pakistan. Later that evening, celebrated Urdu poets from Pakistan will recite works during a *mushaira*, a centuries old practice of poetry gatherings with roots in Arabia and Persia, that continue to flourish in Islamic cultures today. For details and to purchase tickets, visit www.AsiaSociety.org

Also on view

Concurrently on view at Asia Society Museum is *A Prince's Manuscript Unbound: Muhammad Juki's Shahnamah* (February 9 through May 1, 2011), an exhibition of one of the finest surviving Persian manuscripts, a richly illuminated volume commissioned by the Timurid prince Muhammad Juki in the fifteenth century. This rarely exhibited manuscript, now in the collection of the Royal Asiatic Society in London, features more than thirty intricately colored and gilded miniatures that illustrate the Persian national epic, the *Shahnamah* (*Book of Kings*). Also on view is *A Longing for Luxury: Chinese Ceramics from the Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection* (February 9 through June 5, 2011) comprising Song through Qing dynasty porcelains and stonewares from Asia Society Museum’s permanent collection.

About Asia Society Museum

Asia Society Museum presents groundbreaking exhibitions and artworks, many previously unseen in North America. The Museum is known for its permanent collection of masterpiece-quality works gifted to the society by Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd. Through its exhibitions and related public programs, Asia Society provides a forum for the issues and viewpoints reflected in both traditional and contemporary Asian art. Founded in 1956, Asia Society is a nonprofit educational institution with offices in Hong Kong, Houston, Los Angeles, Manila, Melbourne, Mumbai, New York, San Francisco, Seoul, Shanghai and Washington, D.C.

Asia Society Museum is located at 725 Park Avenue (at 70th Street), New York City. The Museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and Friday from 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Closed on Mondays and major holidays. General admission is \$10, seniors \$7, students \$5 and free for members and persons under 16. Free admission Friday evenings, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. For more information, visit www.AsiaSociety.org

###