

Influence of Buddhism on Ancient Indian Art

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The Buddha and Buddhism were important to the culture and art of ancient India. In this lesson, you will learn about:

1. Period and Location: Influence of Buddhism on Ancient Indian Art
2. The Buddha
3. Ashoka and Buddhism
4. Yakshi Figure



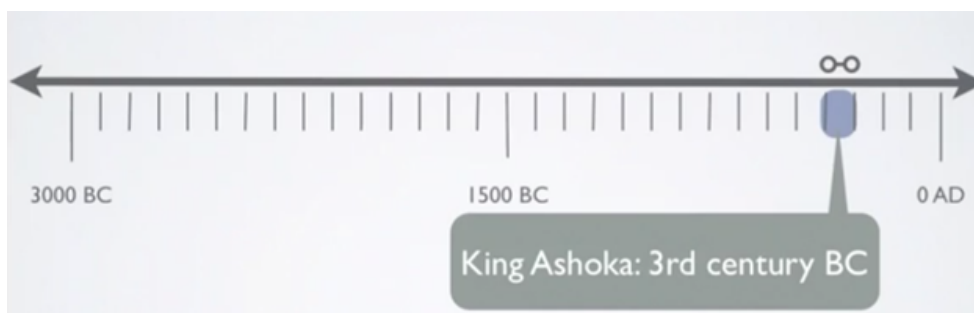
BIG IDEA

The Buddhist religion began to show its influence on ancient Indian art during the Mauryan period.

1. Period and Location: Influence of Buddhism on Ancient Indian Art

This lesson focuses on the reign of King Ashoka, during the 3rd century BCE in ancient India. Specifically, you will focus on the Indian subcontinent.

Below is a timeline of this time period.



2. The Buddha

The Buddha is important, because he's the founder and namesake of Buddhism. His name means "enlightened one." He was born as Siddhartha Gautama around 563 BCE and died in 483 BCE.

Buddhism considers life as a journey of self-discovery, with the ultimate goal being to achieve nirvana, which is enlightenment or a profound peace of mind. To do this, earthly desires, considered suffering, must be eliminated. Working towards this is called the path to enlightenment.

Upon becoming enlightened, Siddhartha changed his name to Gautama Buddha, or simply the Buddha, and decided to travel around India to preach his discipline. One of the places that he stopped was called **Sarnath**. Sarnath has become a pilgrimage site for Buddhists, because it was here that the Buddha converted a man named Kondanna and his followers. This conversion in turn created the first Sangha, or Buddhist community.



TERM TO KNOW

Sarnath

An important pilgrimage site where the first Buddhist Sangha came into existence through the enlightenment of Kondanna.

3. Ashoka and Buddhism

King **Ashoka** ruled the Mauryan Kingdom from 272 BCE to 231 BCE. The **Mauryan Kingdom** was the largest ancient Indian empire. It was founded in 323 BCE after the defeat of Alexander the Great and the Macedonians, or Greeks. This is important because later, King Ashoka adopted Buddhism. In doing so, he made it the national religion. He regretted the loss of life and suffering that had occurred when he amassed his kingdom and sought to remedy it by promoting Buddhism. The **Pillars of Ashoka** were about 30 to 40 feet tall. They were inscribed with the laws, or **edicts**, which Ashoka based on the dharma, the idea of duty in Buddhism.

These pillars were embedded in the earth and created a vertical connection between heaven and earth known as an **axis mundi**. Some, but not all, of the pillars were inscribed with Ashoka's laws, or edicts, and were located throughout his kingdom in order to ensure people were adhering to the laws. Many of the pillars had sculptures of animals at the top, or capital. These pillars appear to have been inspired by similar examples in Persian art (it is thought that the artists might have even been Persian) and the famous relief sculptures of lions from Assyria. The columns that had animals at their capitals became highly sought after, with mughal emperors and others removing them, so that very few today are intact.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Here is one of the Pillars of Ashoka, a 3rd-century BCE stone structure:



Pillars of Ashoka

Distributed throughout India

3rd century BCE

Stone



DID YOU KNOW

One of the most famous of Ashoka's pillars features four lions seated with their backs facing each other. They are standing on a platform that includes a wheel of dharma as a decorative element underneath each lion. Today, the lions appear on the national emblem of India, while the wheel by itself is on the Indian flag.



सत्यमेव जयते

The national emblem of India, adopted in 1947



TERMS TO KNOW

Ashoka

An important Buddhist king of 3rd-century BCE India, known for his edicts, posted at the top of monumental pillars.

Mauryan Kingdom

One of the largest ancient Indian empires during the 4th to 2nd century BCE.

Ashokan Pillars

Pillars inscribed with the edicts by Mauryan King Ashoka.

Edicts

Orders commanded by an authority or supreme ruler.

Axis Mundi

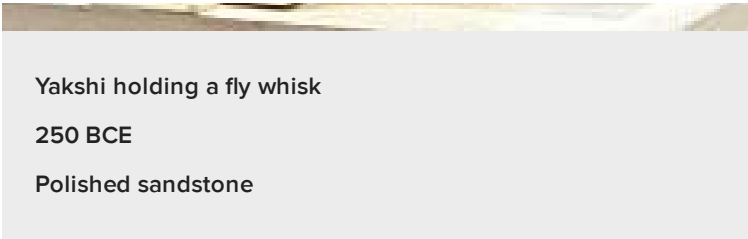
In religion or mythology, the center or connection between heaven and earth; the point where communication can occur between higher and lower regions.

4. Yakshi Figure

Monumental architecture was not the only artwork of importance during this time. Sculpture was another form of art that gained importance during the 3rd century BCE.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Here is an example of a yakshi holding a fly whisk. Yakshi were mythical female beings that have roots in the mythology of ancient Indian religions. They were somewhat similar to fairies in that their function was to protect nature. They were thought to reside inside of rocks, trees, and bodies of water. Images of yakshi are often found at Buddhist sites, like the Great Stupa at Sanchi, where their function is apotropaic, or protective.





Yakshi holding a fly whisk

250 BCE

Polished sandstone

The above image shows the skill of the artists in depicting not only the female physical features, but also elements such as jewelry and the folds of the cloth. The surface of this sculpture is extremely shiny. This is a trait associated with Mauryan period art, including the capital sculptures of the Ashokan pillars.



DID YOU KNOW

Yakshi were mythical female beings that have roots in the mythology of ancient Indian religions—not just Buddhism, but also Hinduism and Jainism. These stylized figures are typically depicted as voluptuous, enhancing certain parts of the female anatomy that were associated with fertility and nature.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of the influence of Buddhism on ancient Indian art**. The **Buddha** was an important figure, and it was from him that the religion of Buddhism takes its name. Buddhism looks at life as a journey of self-discovery, with the ultimate goal being to achieve nirvana.

You also learned about **Ashoka and Buddhism** as you explored how King Ashoka eventually adopted Buddhism. In doing so, he made it the national religion.

Finally, you learned about the **yakshi figure**. Yakshi were mythical female beings that have roots in the mythology of ancient Indian religions.

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