

# Interpreting Iconographical Representation of the Feminine in Art Schools of Buddhism

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## **Abstract**

Art history has emerged as a significant area of social science research in recent times. Art objects often reflect different meanings to viewers. Art is also important in understanding or reconstructing our past. In this context, an attempt has been made to understand Buddhist Indian art as presented by different schools. Women have been depicted as a manifestation of the Divine or as mother goddesses in the Indian religious context. Buddhist art maintains this continuity. This article is an endeavor to analyze aspects of the feminine representation in different art schools of Buddhism such as Sachi, Bharhut Mathura, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Sarnath, and Gandhara. The period under review is from 6th century B.C. to 6th century A.D., as this is a time that constitutes a distinct period in the evolution of Indian art. This paper also intends to focus on the depiction of women in sculpture through various themes, tackled by different schools.

**Keywords:** Buddhist art, Mathura art, Gandhara art, feminine representation, iconography, Indian art.

## **Introduction**

The advent of Buddhism was one of the rarest and most unique events which influenced the entire socio-political-cultural atmosphere of Bharatvarsh. The 6th century B.C. was the age of remarkable intellectual and religious ferment in Bharat. The spread of a new agrarian economy, and the highly scholastic doctrines of Upanishads, the Varna hierarchy were some of the causes of the inception of Buddhism. These changes brought significant development in women's status also. Women have always had a powerful position within the household as mothers and Buddhism extended their role outside the family and this was revolutionary.

Art has been a powerful medium for expressing societal norms, cultural beliefs, and religious and individual perspectives throughout history. In ancient India, the period from 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. witnessed the flourishing of different art schools. Among the rich tapestry of artistic representation, the depiction of the female holds a significant place. Understanding the iconographical interpretation of women in ancient Indian art schools not only allows us to appreciate the artistic achievements of the past but also provides a deeper understanding of the roles and perceptions of women in the socio-cultural fabric of that era. This article tries to explore and interpret the representation of the feminine in sculptural art of different schools which will offer valuable insight into the historical, social, and religious narratives that shaped ancient Indian society.

## **Buddha and Art**

There is a misconception among many scholars that Siddharth Gautama, or Buddha from hereon, ignored and condemned art. They accepted the notion that art and poetry are inimical to Buddhism. Coomaraswamy (1928) quotes three passages from the Pali text to prove that the Buddha condemned art. One is from the *Cullavagga*, in which the monks were forbidden to allow the figures of men and women to be painted on monastery walls and only permitted wreaths and creeper motifs. Another passage is from the *Dasadhamma Sutta* in which the Buddha says: 'Beauty is nothing to me; neither the beauty of the body nor that comes from a dress.' The third passage quoted by him is from the *Visuddhi Magga*. "Living beings on account of their love and devotion to the sensations excited by forms and other objects of sense give high honor to painters, musicians, perfumers, cooks and elixir-prescribing physicians, and other like persons who furnish us with objects of sense."

These passages apply only to monks who, when entering the order, have promised to strictly observe the vow of celibacy. To keep away from women and sensual pleasures and not to admire the beauty of women and their colorful costumes is not necessarily a revelation of Buddha's attitude toward art. Nor do the above passages suggest that the Buddha was averse or hostile to art. There are no direct statements regarding art from the Buddha's side because Buddha did not expound aesthetic theories of art.

The Buddha's image, the Stupa and the paintings of Jataka stories were all introduced after his death. Now comes the question of female representation in Buddhist art. This paper discusses the depiction of the feminine in sculptures related to episodes and events of Gautama Buddha's life.

## **Development of Different Schools of Art**

The article covers the period from the 6th century B.C. to the 6th century A.D. This time frame constitutes a distinct period in the evolution of proliferation of Indian art. From extant remains that several important schools of sculpture flourished in different localities during this period - at Bharhut and Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh, Bodhgaya in Bihar, Mathura in Uttar Pradesh, Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda near the mouth of Krishna River in Southern India, and Gandhara in West Pakistan (Barnett, 1949; 2012). Buddhist art is considered to be religious, yet no restrictions were laid down for its exposition. Artists were allowed to exhibit themes according to their choice. Various topics and popular themes were selected by different artists during different time periods.

All the Buddhist schools of art revolve around stories from the life of the Buddha, Jatakas, Philosophy, or legends. Thus, an entire attention is focused on the Buddhist ethos. The present paper focuses on the depiction of the female in sculpture through various themes, tackled by different schools. An effort is also made to compare these different schools. Buddhist schools can be divided into two groups namely:

- (a) School of Indian Art (Sachi, Bharhut, Mathura, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Sarnath).
- (b) School of Naturalised Indian, influenced by foreign tradition(s) (Gandhara) (Ogawa et al., 2003).

Buddhist art in India came into existence from the 3rd-2nd century B.C., when the core of the Stupa I of Sanchi was probably constructed. By the close of the pre-Christian era, we find its further development and emergence of Bharhut and Chaitya Hall of Bhaja. From the 2nd century onwards, we find the development of Gandhara art, the growth of the Mathura schools, and the unfolding of Sarnath and Bodhgaya.

In the 2nd century B.C. during the reign of the Sungas, a big stupa was constructed at Bharhut. Sculptures engraved on the railing of the Stupa represent incidents from Buddha's life, Jatakas stories, and many humorous scenes. Short labels incised below the sculptures enable us to identify the episodes represented therein. Taken individually, the human figures do not appear to be well executed and there are obvious defects in the physiognomy and posture of the bodies. However, taken as a mass, the sculptures represent religious faiths and beliefs evident by the dress, costumes and manners, simplicity and vigor. Ancient India, with its robust optimism and vigorous faith in life, speaks as it were, through these stones, in a tone that offers a sharp but pleasing contrast to the dark pessimistic views of life which some of the old religious texts repeat. From this point of view, the art of Bharhut is a great corrective to the impressions which we are likely to form from literature.

Sanchi was a major center of Buddhist monasticism, art, and culture during the period between 200 B.C. and 600 A.D. A noteworthy feature of the monuments of Sanchi is the existence of several hundred short inscriptions; one being an edict of Ashoka prohibiting schism among monks and nuns. The names of the numerous monks and nuns from 200 B.C. to 200 A.D. are recorded among benefactors of different parts of the stupas. The sculptures of Sanchi are thus an important source of Buddhist history, faith, and mythology. In Sanchi,

individual figures, the method of their grouping, the mode of expression, and decorative elements - all show a far higher standard of technical skill and artistic conception. The sculptures of Sanchi are throughout, inspired by a far higher sense of beauty, rhythm, and symmetry and possess the difficult art of telling a complicated story in a simple lucid way. Thus, we say that the railing at Bharhut and Sanchi may be regarded as a landmark in the gradual evolution of art. By this point, the Indian artist had mastered the difficult technique and acquired a highly developed aesthetic sense.

In the Mathura School of Art, one finds numerous fragments of smaller railings with sculptures and quite a large number of images, either detached or engraved in high relief on some architectural fragments. The Mathura sculptures are easily distinguished by the materials used - a type of spotted red stone. In Mathura School of Art, two types of sculptures exist. The earlier phase of sculptures is rude and rough work while the sculptures of the later period possess one distinguishing characteristic, viz. the representation of Buddha as a human figure. This is entirely unknown at Bharhut, Bodhgaya, and Sanchi, where Buddha is always represented by a symbol such as a wheel, a throne, or a pair of footprints and never by an anthropomorphic representation. The evolution of a human image of Buddha at Mathura began a new epoch in Indian art. Later on, for centuries the best artistic efforts of India were directed towards giving a concrete expression of the spiritual ideals of India through the images of the Buddha.

The Buddhist art of Gandhara appeared at various ancient sites in present-day Afghanistan and West Pakistan. They consist mostly of images of Buddha and relief sculptures representing scenes from Buddhist texts. Some technical characteristics easily distinguish them from all other specimens of Indian sculpture. In the first place, there is a tendency to mold the human body realistically with great attention to the accuracy of physical details, especially by the delineation of muscles and the addition of mustaches, etc. Secondly, the representation of the thick drapery with large and bold fold lines forms a distinct characteristic. These distinguishing characteristics of Gandhara sculpture were undoubtedly derived from Greek art, or to be more precise, the Hellenistic art of Asia Minor and the Roman Empire. Gandhara art is accordingly known also as Indo-Greek or Graeco-Roman. The majority of sculptures are made of schist stone which has different colors and is available in the hills of that region.

A powerful school of Buddhist art flourished in Andhra Pradesh from the 2nd century B.C. to medieval times. The great stupas at Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda were active centers of several sects of Mahasanghikas and Sthaviravada. The figures at Amaravati are characterized by slim features and they are represented in the most difficult poses and curves. The Blessed one is often represented by a symbol. It thus points to a period of transition between Bharhut, Bodhgaya, and Sanchi on the one hand and Mathura and Gandhara on the other.

Moving to the depiction of women in art one can notice that some themes have been commonly handled by all Buddhist schools of Art. However, we cannot call them a repetition of themes, for each artist has portrayed the feminine with individual skills by high-lightning a

different aspect, a different mood, and a different form of composition. Here are some examples of sculptures in which we show the depiction of women in two forms:

1. Common female figures

2. Goddesses

Some of the common female themes are discussed below.

**Nativity or the Dream of Queen Maya :** This is one of the most popular themes of Buddhist art represented very frequently and practically in every period of history. According to the prevailing legend, one-night Queen Maya saw in a dream that a six-tusked white elephant was hovering over her womb and entering into it from her right-hand side. All the learned Brahmins unanimously interpreted the dream as of conception and predicted that a noble soul will take birth on earth in due course of time.

At Bharhut in a medallion, Maya Devi is reclining on the bed while a large-sized elephant is hovering above. In the Gandhara region, several reliefs exist showing a female reclining on a couch and an elephant hovering above her. The elephant is smaller in size and is encircled with a halo-like disc, and his position is inclined so that his trunk touches the right hip of Maya Devi. Gandhara artist portrays a single moment of time and a single point perspective view of the cot and the sleeping female. The same theme is again shown at Amaravati with a difference that the posture of the sleeping woman (or mother) is much more conspicuous, with several flexions in her body, one of the features of the Amaravati style (Parimoo, 1982).

### **Shalabhanjika**

This motif is very common and scholars describe this form to be traditional, related to fertility, being a tree spirit, being a Yakshini, an architectural motif, or device, a voluptuous and beautiful embodiment of female figure.

The Buddhist texts affirm that Buddha does not come into this world like a normal human being but that his mother was ordained to give birth to him while in a standing position. The Buddha was born in the Lumbini Garden where his mother had stopped on her way to her father's house. According to tradition, at this point in time the Shalabhanjika festival was going on in the garden and the moment Queen Maya caught hold of the branch of a Sala tree to participate in the game, she delivered the child but in a very unusual fashion. Gautama is thus shown emerging out of the right side of his mother's waist. Brahma and Indra are shown to have come to receive the child. The artist depicted this event and this motif is called Shalabhanjika. We find this description of Birth in Mahavastu, texts (Bhagwat, 1953).

Perhaps for the first time at Amaravati, the sculpture thought of using the Shalabhanjika motif for the birth of Buddha, connecting this fertility symbol, which is a universal symbol, to a particular event. (Kramrisch, 1960). Kramrisch has pertinently stated that in the Shalabhanjika motif the vegetative and the feminine coalesce so organically as to transmit the creative generative energy from one to the other. (1960). The Shalabhanjika motif is not present in Sanchi. There we find a female figure on the lotus. One such relief is found on the balustrade of Sanchi, Stupa No. II. The nude woman in tri flexion, standing in a pond on a lotus - the symbol of life - seems to be an appropriate mother archetype.

In the Bharat Kala Bhawan Museum at Banaras Hindu University, a preserved sculpture attests to the dignity and grace of Queen Maya. This fragmentary Gandhara bust is dated to around 2nd century A.D. Maya is shown holding a branch of a tree with her right hand, the left arm is missing almost from the shoulder. Her lowered face is shown beaming with the joy of motherhood. Her right arm, full of bangles from wrist to shoulder, is a unique depiction. Queen Maya's hairdo, with a heavy floral motif in the front, reveals the influence of Graeco-Roman art. Her necklace, earring, a fitted blouse, and sari are all rendered with the utmost care, formal and symmetrical (Figure 1). Another example of Shalabhanjika can be seen in a rectangular panel from 2nd century A.D. in Gandhara art. The Buddha's mother is shown standing under the tree, calmly with her face slightly lowered. To her left, Maya Devi is assisted by her sisters and attendants. All the females are fully adorned and dressed alike in dhotis (Figure 2). This theme is also depicted in Mathura art but from the art style of point, this is not as intricate.

In the Sarnath style, we find a significant relief dating from the 5th century. Here Maya Devi is depicted as a bashful aristocratic lady, with her legs covered by a garment (Parimoo, 1982). The aesthetics and functionality of Shalabhanjika's image have evolved over the time. Its form and function were conditioned by the context in which the images are depicted. In some places, it indicates an increased sensualization in the representation of the female form, whereas it is also used as a part of architectural arrangements.

### **New Couple at the Palace**

A relief of Bharat Kala Bhawan Collection from the 2nd century A.D. of Gandhara art style is a magnificent relief. It is part of a large stele that might have presented the scene of great renunciation in three successive stages. In the first stage, Siddhartha Gautama and Yasodhara are shown seated on a couch, foot adorned with ornament and resting on a stool. The couple is enjoying the performance of a court dancer accompanied by a musician in the compartment on their right. Yasodhara is beautifully adorned with a floral wreath on the head along with other jeweled ornaments (Figure 3). The main figures are static and the dancer with the musician is awkwardly cramped in the little space made available to her. The Gandharan artists failed to depict the intricate dance postures of Indian women - the movement of the body and twists and turns of limbs which are observed in Mathura art are completely missing here (Asthana, 1999).

### **The Sleeping Women**

The episode of the sleeping women is seldom represented among the series of biographical bas-reliefs preserved from Gandhara. The representation of Siddhartha's religious crisis seems originally to have been shown in three sections. Marriage was followed by a life of pleasure in the harem. This caused distaste, and it brought about the Great Renunciation. Such a sequence was as logical as possible but seemed far too simple to the biographers, who felt the need for complicated amplification. On one point, however, both writers and sculptures agree. The final point that sealed the prince's decision to renounce worldly life was the sight of sleeping women (Rockhill, 1991). A sculpture that is preserved in Fogg Museum - Harvard University, depicts Siddhartha's bedroom with two successive representations. In

the first one, Prince Siddharth is lying on his bed, with his wife seated at his feet and a number of women are shown laying around them in a sleep state. In the second scene, the Yasodhara is lying down, possibly asleep while Siddhartha, who has just woken up, is not sitting on the bed. The dancers and musicians, having seen the prince asleep, have followed his example and have fallen asleep in the very places they occupied when dancing and playing.

In Amaravati, Siddharth is represented iconically as a throne seat on which two cushions are placed. Women lie on the floor in different postures around the throne. The description of the female dancers and musicians attending to the young prince in his palace is contained in the Mahavastu, Nidanakatha, and Buddhacharita of Ashvaghosa. Each of them mentions the disgust that Siddhartha felt on seeing the loathsome and unseemly sight of the awkward sleeping women surrounding him. For example, each of them is shown to have Saliva dripping from their mouths. The sculptor has stretched his knowledge of female anatomy to the utmost to conjure up postures, bends, and flexions, combining intricate back views and contortions of limbs to evoke images of ugliness rather than grace, in order to establish a sense of disgust. The exhausted women, now gone limp, hold on to musical instruments like the Mridanga or a string instrument. The motif of two sleeping women lying awkwardly, looking like a pair of exhausted lovers also appears on the left. The relatively elongated, and at the same time well-built, slim and springy, supple, free, and lithe physiognomic forms crowd the Amaravati reliefs. This form of the human body corresponds so closely with the physiognomical type of the local Chenchu tribal women (Ray, 1965).

### **Sujata's Offerings and Gautama's Enlightenment**

We have come to know through Buddhist text(s) that after receiving dessert payasam from a lady named Sujata, the Bodhisattva achieved enlightenment on the following night. It is an auspicious beginning of the great event of enlightenment. This event is portrayed at Amaravati, yet it never became a favorite theme for the sculptures, nor did it achieve an intrinsic significance for the enlightenment episode and therefore is hardly repeated anywhere. Although the texts state that Sujata and her maids felt a special pleasure to find that Gautama had come down from the tree to receive their offerings they thought he was a tree spirit, yet in Amaravati roundel, the Buddha is not present in human form. Nevertheless, this relief is the most characteristic example of adoration of a deity by female devotees, who are grounded around the centrally placed throne and the Bodhi tree. The adoring figures in the foreground, with their bending bodies, from a tier at the throne level, next flows a row of standing women carrying offerings, and a third row of figures above it gives the effect of rising levels. A circle is formed by the roofs of the village huts, within which another circle is formed by the bending figures below and at either side of the throne, between which stands the vertical tree. The figure on the left may be Sujata, who first offered water to the Gautama, which he received by his right hand.

Thus, we can say that these sculptural reliefs are rich and revealing sources for obtaining a fascinating insight into the creative mind of the Indian artist. No specific text was followed by the sculptures, although some regional patterns of what is narrated in the relief do emerge.

Some texts were written after certain sculptures had been already created, like the significant example of the Buddha's curly hair and Maya Devi's Shalabhanjika scene as she gave birth to Siddhartha. So, it seems that artists obtained their information from oral traditions as well.

### **Female Deities**

The Mother Goddess is important in the religious history of India. The worship of the Divine Feminine was so deeply rooted in the Indian mind that in all the sectarian religions the female principle is given a prominent position. Even in Buddhism and Jainism the Divine Feminine influence is present. The Buddhist Pantheon features a fascinating and diverse array of female divinities. According to the Pali texts, we have come to know that the Earth Mother Prthivi, or Dharani, and the goddesses of fortune - Lakshmi or Sri appear most important in the early Buddhist pantheon.

In the life story of Gautama Buddha the goddess Prithvi appears in an event popularly known as the 'Maravijaya' or 'Victory over Mara'. It is said that when the Bodhisattva was on the verge of enlightenment, Mara descended with his armies to prevent Siddhartha from attaining the Supreme goal. At this time, goddess Prthivi dispersed Mara's armies (Davids, 2009). When Mara came to disrupt Buddha, Shakyamuni touched the ground (goddess Prthivi) with his right hand, and "the whole world quaked six times and there was a fearful reaction; the heaving earth dashed their chariots to pieces, crushed their weapons, and threw them to the ground, helpless" (Shaw, 2015). The moment when the Buddha summoned the Earth goddess by touching the fingertips of his right hand to the earth, is known as an 'earth-touching gesture' (Bhumisparsamudra). In many sculptures, we find Buddha with this gesture. Goddess Prthivi has also found mention in other contexts; according to a Vinaya tradition, Shakyamuni instructed his chief disciple Ananda, that monastic robes should be pieced together in a patchwork pattern to resemble the furrows of plowed fields, in honor of goddess Prthivi (Machwe, 1998).

The earliest Portrayals of the Prthivi goddess are found among the Gandharan reliefs illustrating the life of Gautama Buddha. The extant Gandharan examples consistently depict Prthivi with her head and upper torso emerging from the earth, surrounded by foliage, at the base of the Bodhi throne. Her hands are not usually depicted. Buddhist sculptors endowed the Earth goddess with a readily recognizable iconographic form. From the beginning, we find foliage framing of the Earth goddess's body, gradually sculptures portraying Prthivi with part of her body - only the lower legs or even a single foot - submerged within the earth, have continued from the Gupta era (4th to 5th centuries). In the late 5th century other iconographic types emerged; for example, a representation in which the goddess kneels on one or both knees.

Another important female deity of early Buddhism was Sri Lakshmi. Lakshmi is mentioned as a goddess of wealth, abundance, and good fortune. The Buddhist depictions of Lakshmi at Bharhut and Sanchi are among the earliest known images of the goddesses. One relief is found on the balustrade of Sanchi Stupa No. II. - a nude woman in triflexion, standing in a pond on a lotus - the symbol of life, would seem to be a mother archetype. This cannot be the goddess, as is the case with many other female figures, not often nude who are being



lustrated by elephants while standing on a lotus platform. These images have been convincingly proven to be the iconic forms of Gajalakshmi, equally accepted in the Buddhist fold, and also in Jainism. In early Buddhist art, Lakshmi most commonly appears in her epiphany as 'Gajalakshmi' in which a pair of elephants atop their own lotus pedestals lustrate (Abhisheka) the goddess from vessels held aloft in their trunks (Coomaraswamy, 1928). We find references to Lakshmi in the Pali literature as well. The Dhammapada refers to her as the goddess who grants good fortune to a Kingdom. The blessings of Sri Lakshmi are linked to ethical virtue. Thus, Goddess Lakshmi, as a purely auspicious and beneficent figure, found an honored place in early Buddhist art and devotion.

The images of Yaksini (figure 4) (voluptuous, magical Nature Spirits) are a regular feature in Buddhist Stupas, railings, pillars, and gates. Yaksas and Yaksinis are closely associated with trees and are believed to be door guardians in Indian religiosity. Buddhism continued the belief in Yakshas and Yakshinis as an integral part of the pre-existing cosmology and local traditions and rituals of the Hindu belief system. Yaksas and Yakshinis figure in the Pantheon of beings and powers that constitute the physical and spiritual world, just as much as a part of existence as human beings. This class of beings is a recurrent theme in Buddhist literature and art. Yaksas find frequent mention in the narratives of the life of Buddha; they appear as supernatural allies of the Buddha and protectors of his followers.

The sculptures depict the Yakshas in the form of legendary female beauty. Generally, the Yakshinis representation is seen consisting of rounded breasts, a slender waist, and ample hips accentuated by a broad, jeweled hip belt. The figures are either nude or minimally clothed with diaphanous garments, and every part of the body is enhanced by ornamentation. The hair is elaborately dressed and the ears are adorned by large pendants. The upper torso is decked with necklaces, and the slim wrists and ankles are encircled by tiers of bangles and anklets. They are mostly depicted in relaxed poses and their facial expression is beatific. The Yakshini images from Buddhist Stupa sites are important as the earliest documentable representations of the magical Nature spirits and reverence toward the powerful feminine.

Whereas the earlier pantheon was drawn largely from pre-existing figures and figural type, the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism accorded substantial attention to female goddesses. The Guhyasamaja Tantra introduced Sakti (women, considered as a manifestation of divine energy) into Buddhism. According to the text, Lord Buddha transforms himself in the form of five Dhyani Buddhas and associates each of them with a Sakti. In the latter period, we may see a large number of female divinities. The Goddess Prajnya Paramita, Aprajta, Tara, Hariti, Ushravijya, Saraswati, and the presence of many other goddesses evolved over time and were placed prominently in Buddhist beliefs, practices, and devotion.

In conclusion, the art of the period under review is rich. When examined closely, it reveals significant depth and meaning to art aesthetics, religious beliefs, and gendered perspective and social content. This is especially important given the misconceptions about the Buddha's disdain for art. Different Buddhist schools of art have shown reverence toward Mother Nature, Yakshinis and Deities such as Lakshmi and they have always shown Maya Devi and Yasodhara with reverence. The instance where Gautama decides to renounce the material

world and his palace is depicted by his disgust toward the material world and the consequences, not necessarily hatred toward women or the arts. One can see the depiction of women in Mathura school as gorgeous feminine figures created by the Mathura artists with beauty, grace, and appeal. On the other hand, the Gandhara school was influenced by Hellenistic and Greco - Buddhist traditions where the feminine was depicted with a blend of Indian and Western features. Each of the schools have expressed a unique and beautiful dimension of the feminine as pertaining to the Buddha's life and major events.

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Figure 1. Maya Devi. 2nd century A.D. Gandhara Art, Bharat Kala Bhawan, BHU, India.



Figure 2: The Birth of the Buddha. 2nd century A.D. Gandhara Art, Bharat Kala Bhawan, BHU, India.



Figure 3: New Couple at Palace. 2nd century A.D. Gandhara Art, Bharat Kala Bhawan, BHU India.



Figure 4. Yakshini. 2nd century A.D. Mathura Art, Bharat Kala Bhawan, BHU, India.