# *Sultanganj Buddha*

**Key facts:**

Date: 500-700 CE

Size: 223cm, 100cm at its widest point. It weighs about 500kg

Materials: Copper

Location: Birmingham Art Gallery

Source: Excavated at a vihara (monastery) at Sultanganj, Bihar on the river Ganges in northern India in 1862

Style: Post-Gupta

Scope of work for Pearson Edexcel A Level: Identities in Art and Architecture – divine, pre-1850, beyond the European tradition.

Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

## 1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter: The Sultanganj Buddha is a representation of Siddhārtha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism who lived in India/Nepal around the 6th century BCE.[1] The word Buddha means 'the enlightened one'.

Map showing the location the state of Arunachal Pradesh, India. Digital image courtesy of visitmygreatindia.blogspot.com

[1] https://smarthistory.org/aniconic-vs-iconic-depictions-of-the-buddha-in-india/

Buddhism was one of two religions, alongside Jainism, that emerged in the 6th century BCE. The main aim of Buddhism was to achieve 'enlightenment attained by the obliteration of all desires and, finally, of the self through concentrated meditation or yoga.'[2]

Siddhārtha Gautama was born into a warrior caste in Nepal, north India, though he was a prince. He studied under the Brahmins (in Hinduism, a caste or group specialising as priests, teachers (acharya) and protectors of sacred learning across generations) and achieved what was described as 'enlightened cosmic consciousness' known as Buddhahood.[3] After leaving behind the luxuries he had experienced in the palace he grew up in, he began to seek out the true purpose of life. Siddhārtha began by attempting asceticism, a severe form of self-discipline where all forms of indulgence are avoided, but abandoned this after six years. Instead, he took the 'Middle Way'; he sat down in yogic meditation beneath a bodhi tree until he achieved enlightenment. He spent 49 days meditating under the Bodhi tree, 'Tree of Wisdom', 'vowing not to move until he had gained enlightenment and finally solved the mystery of human suffering.'[4] Siddhārtha 'became a Buddha'[5] and devoted the rest of his life to preaching his message; after his death, a group of followers continued to preach his teachings.

*'The cremated relics of the Buddha were divided into several portions and placed in relic caskets that were interred within large hemispherical mounds known as stupas. Such stupas constitute the central monument of Buddhist monastic complexes.'*[6]

The Great Stupa at Sanchi, construction begun 3rd century BCE. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

[2] Honour and Fleming, A World History of Art, 'Buddhism', p.219
[3] ibid
[4] http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/b/buddhism-and-the-life-of-the-buddha/
[5] ibid
[6] https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/budd/hd_budd.htm

This stupa in Sanchi, central India provides the earliest visual manifestation of Buddha - the domed shape of the stupa came 'to represent a person seated in meditation much as the Buddha was when he achieved Enlightenment'.[7]

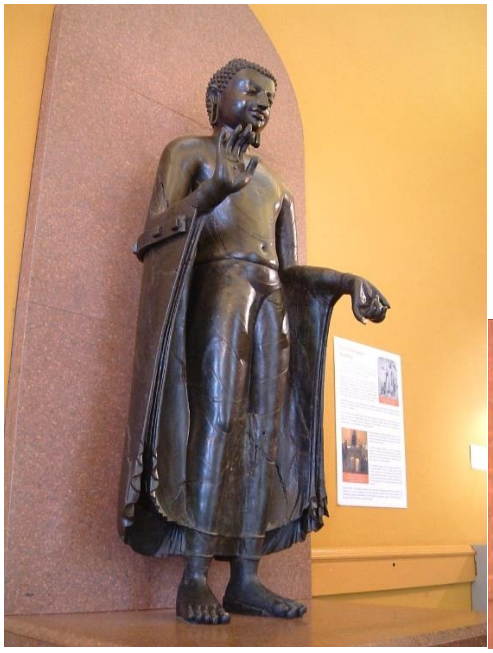
The iconography of images of the Buddha is highly organised and distinguished by the stylised pose – asana (usually standing, sitting or reclining), the mudra – gestures, and the 32 lakshanas – special bodily features.

Formal qualities: The sculpture of Sultanganj Buddha is in a standing pose/asana and is designed to focus the mind of the viewer.

It can be recognised as the Buddha by the lakshanas, summarised here rather than listed: well-placed flat-footed broad-heeled feet securely on the ground, ankle bones that are hardly visible, lower legs like an antelope, tall straight body frame with broad slightly curved shoulders, broad neck, 'torso like a lion', arms that reach to the knees when standing, genitals withdrawn, the mark of the wheel of the law on his outstretched palm, tender soft broad palms, hairs of the head in soft curls that point to the right, smooth delicate golden skin, 'cheeks like a lion'. He has a tuft of hair or third eye between his eyebrows (represented by the urna) which symbolises spiritual insight and a bump on the top of his head known as the ushnisha, which symbolised wisdom and spirituality and his attainment of enlightenment.[8]

The sculpture has a smooth, highly polished, dark surface and the eyes are downcast. Curved contour lines inscribed on his torso and limbs suggest a thin layer of clothing, rather than a nude form, beneath the strong vertical cloak that clings to and frames the lower half of the figure's body before spreading out in ripples at the hem. One hand is raised whilst the other palm is offered.

[7] https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/south-east-se-asia/india-art/v/aam-stupa
[8] http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/iconography-of-the-buddha/



Top left Sultanganj Buddha. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

Top right Sultanganj Buddha. Digital image courtesy of livehistoryindia.com

Bottom left Sultanganj Buddha (detail). Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

Bottom right Sultanganj Buddha (detail). Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

Representations of the Buddha have several physical characteristics that help us identify him.

Facial features – deemed to 'focus the mind on the believer'[9], 'the eyes which are cast downwards as if to emphasise contemplation and rejection of the material world'.[10]

The elongated earlobes, once weighted down by the material possessions/jewellery he wore as a prince, symbolise a conscious rejection of the material world in favour of spiritual enlightenment.

Monastic robe – *sangathi.* In this instance the robe is almost invisible as it clings so tightly to the body.

Mudras (Sanskit for gesture) are symbolic. His right hand: – *Abhaya* – means 'no fear' and hence shows the Buddha giving reassurance and protection to his followers. Left: palm outward and held upwards = granting a favour.

The 'fear not' gesture, the raising of the hand, is a common feature in depictions of Buddha (and similar to Christ's gesture of blessing in Christian art).

The 'Sultanganj Buddha' is said to be 'influenced by the celebrated naturalistic though idealised Gupta style (C4-C6th CE) which was shaped by European and Persian sculptural traditions that came to India through trade and through the invasion of India by Alexander the Great in 326 BCE.[11]

Head of the Buddha, Gupta period, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, 5th century, sandstone, 19.6 x 10.7 x 17.7 cm. Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum (IM.4-1927)

Standing figure of the Buddha Sakyamuni, Eastern India, probably Bihar, late 6th-early 7th century, copper alloy lost-wax casting, 38 x 14 cm. Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum (IS.3-2004)

[9] Curator Adam Jaffer talks about The Sultanganj Buddha, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwTn0m--GXg
[10] ibid
[11] https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/69.222/

Honour and Fleming state that from the 1st century BCE there is a tradition within figurative sculpture in India for the body to be treated in quite a different way to the classical ideal. Instead of a focus on bone structure and muscularity, the figure often seems to have been made entirely from 'soft malleable flesh'.[12] They state that it is this that gives the figures 'a strangely ethereal quality, exemplifying the combination of sensuality and spirituality that distinguishes the arts of India from those of other civilizations.' It could certainly be said that the Sultanganji Buddha exhibits these qualities.

According to the BBC archive this work is a 'splendid example of the renowned Gupta sculptural style which itself had been shaped by European and Persian influences that came through the trade routes with Rome and West Asia.'[13] A monastic complex in Sarnath (the site of Buddha's first sermon) housed the sculpture workshops which became known for 'the full, sensuous modelling of faces and bodies, for a subtlety of expression and for the harmonious proportions of its figures. A particular type of standing Buddha image was produced here whose body is covered by a diaphanous robe, which clings to the figure while flaring at the sides.'[14] The Sultanganj Buddha was produced later (6/7th century) but has similar stylistic features to those discussed and is often referred to as 'Post-Gupta'.

## 2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

In early forms of Buddhism, Dr Jennifer N. McIntire has explored how the Buddha was 'simply a human being'[15] but, as the religion changes and adapts, the Buddha becomes deified. Andrew Skilton disputes this, he argues instead that the Buddha was never historically regarded by Buddhist traditions as being merely human:

*'It is important to stress that, despite modern Theravada teachings to the contrary (often a sop to skeptical Western pupils), he was never seen as being merely human. For instance, he is often described as having the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks or signs of a mahāpuruṣa, "superman"; the Buddha himself denied that he was either a man or a god; and in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta he states that he could live for an aeon were he asked to do so.'*[16]

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[12] Honour and Fleming, A World History of Art, 'Buddhism', p.218
[13] http://www.bbc.co.uk/birmingham/content/articles/2006/05/10/sultanganj_buddha_feature.shtml
[14] ibid
[15] https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/cultures-religions-ap-arthistory/a/the-historical-buddha
[16] Andrew Skilton, A Concise History of Buddhism, Windhorse, 1994

Returning to the sculpture itself, Chris Wingfield has noted the statue as 'the history of the Sultanganj Buddha as a material object suggests that it has the peculiar capacity to become the focus for human activity, in the process gathering other people and objects around it.'[17] Wingfield worked at Birmingham Museum from 2004 to 2006 and notes that the Buddha is 'the only object in the Birmingham collections that has become the focus for a regular religious ritual' but more particularly that it is the one object that stands apart in its ability to 'elicit such a degree of human response'.[18] The sculpture, for instance, is one of the few objects in the collections that visitors regularly reach out to touch, contravening traditional museum conventions.

The 'iconic' Buddha, as we now know and recognise it, evolved over time; parallels could be drawn in the slow evolution of the representation of Christ from the use of a sign to the resolution of a familiar physical typology. Images of Buddha start to appear in the 1st century CE. Before this point he had been known only by his presence, a footprint, a parasol or the image of a stupa (a temple which would have contained a relic of Buddha), for example. Around this time, it was thought that people needed a visual image of Buddha in order to worship him as a deity and develop a close relationship. Most of these would have been an image of the Buddha seated in meditation or, if he is standing, turning the wheel of Dharma (two fingers brought together to turn the wheel). The Buddha can be depicted at many different stages of his life – birth, the point at which he is enlightened, the miracles he performed or his death.

## 3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

The Sultanganj Buddha is the largest known complete metal Indian sculpture and one of the largest in the Pre-Renaissance world. It is made from a copper alloy and cast by the lost-wax technique on a clay core braced with iron armatures. A mould would have been made first to house the original clay model, the mould would then have been brushed with wax and tiny holes put in. Afterwards the hot, molten bronze would be poured in so the wax would melt away through the holes. When the cast was opened and the bronze was taken out it could then be finished – chased and polished. As the Buddha is described as having golden skin, it is likely this sculpture was a bright and shining copper colour rather than having the dark patina it has acquired through age.

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[17] Chris Wingfield, 'Touching the Buddha; encounters with a charismatic object', Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations ed. Sandra Dudley. Routledge: London. pp.53-70.
[18] ibid

## 4. WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

The Birmingham Post reports the circumstances in which the work was originally found:

*'The statue was discovered entirely by chance. In 1861 British railway engineer E.B. Harris was working on the Indian Railway in Sultanganj, north east India. While searching for ballast he began excavating a vast mound of bricks which formed part of the remains of an abandoned Buddhist monastery or vihara. The Buddha was found below the surface with its left foot missing. Harris later reported that in the first week after its discovery, over 10,000 people came to see the statue from the surrounding villages. He paid £200 to ship the statue to England, donating it in 1864 "to be placed in the Art Museum, now being erected", making it one of the first pieces to enter Birmingham's collection. Today the Sultanganj Buddha is displayed alongside other Asian sculpture in the Buddha Gallery. Offerings of flowers are regularly left at its feet by visitors.'*[19]

The discovery of the Buddha in 1862. Digital image courtesy of BBC

E.B. Harris with the Sultanganj Buddha. 1861/1862

E.B. Harris, writing just after the discovery was made, suggests that the siting of the statue gave clues as to its original positioning: 'The image must originally have stood in the verandah and centre of the west face of the building [monastery], it appears to have been thrown from the stone into a hole, partly cut into the floor, the stone afterwards removed a few feet to the south and then turned over; I found it upside down; it then appears that a pucka or concrete floor was constructed along

[19] Anonymous (1864a) 'An Indian God in Birmingham', Birmingham Daily Post, 8 October. Cutting in BM&AG

this portion of the verandah, thus hiding all trace of the image, after which the building from about this level must have been destroyed, and not rebuilt most likely for several hundred years.' [20]

Harris' account suggests that the Buddha was deliberately hidden in order to protect it as Wingfield suggests 'by conditions of iconoclastic threat'. It is thought that the monastery that the Buddha was originally positioned within was under threat so the sculpture had been tipped quickly into a hole in order to protect and preserve it. Other pieces of mutilated remains found in the area provide evidence that the time of its burial was a period of iconoclasm. Its foot was the first part of the sculpture to be found. E.B. Harris thought that by bringing the sculpture back to Birmingham to be displayed it would inspire others in the city to be 'creative'[21] but also, 'a means of educating the tastes of those upon whom the reputation of Birmingham manufactures chiefly depends'.[22]

*'It is a reminder of the extraordinary talents of the sculptors and metal craftsmen in ancient India. Buried for safe-keeping some 700 years after it was made, the statue was discovered and excavated by E.B. Harris, a railway engineer, during railway construction in 1862. It was visited by 30,000 local people in the first week, but its excavation was reported around the world and Samuel Thornton, a Birmingham MP, lobbied for it to come to the city. Thornton funded its removal and transport. The Buddha arrived safely in Birmingham only - allegedly - after a narrow escape from ambush near London docks by curators of the British Museum. The first object to enter the city's collections, it has inspired generations of Birmingham people. The statue now plays a new role in the museum's work with Buddhist communities in the city.' A History of the World in 100 objects*

Not unlike the calls to return the Parthenon Sculptures (or 'Elgin marbles') to Athens, there have been appeals made to return the Sultanganj Buddha to India. These appeals have been made directly from India and have featured in national press articles: 'Lakhs of pilgrims come to Sultanganj to fetch the holy Ganga water before proceeding to Baidyanath Dham in Deoghar. So, Buddha's statue should be here,' said Uday Chandra Jha, a college teacher. 'Why shouldn't our government claim it?' he asked. Shanker Bind of Jan Sansad urged public representatives to raise the issue. Dipak Kumar, a social worker, said: 'Revival of the ancient Vikramshila Mahavihar is on the cards. The statue would be ideal here when the ancient seat of learning is included in the Buddha circuit.'[23]

## FURTHER READING AND LINKS

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[20] Harris, E. B. (1864) Description of Buddhist Remains Discovered at Sooltangunge, London, p.5
[21] Curator Adam Jaffer talks about The Sultanganj Buddha, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwTn0m--GXg
[22] Davies, S. (1985) By the Gains of Industry, Birmingham: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, p.15
[23] 'Give it back, Birmingham', The Telegraph India, 5 May 2015

- ANONYMOUS (1864) 'An Indian God in Birmingham', *Birmingham Daily Post*
- BARNFIELD, S., (2015) Sultanganj Buddha is Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery's Object of the Month for February, *The Birmingham Post*
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- http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/8-3XPL7dTim7Xpv39u8oXw
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- https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/69.222/
- https://scroll.in/article/807006/not-just-the-kohinoor-four-other-artefacts-that-india-wants-britain-to-return
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwTn0m--GXg (Curator Adam Jaffer talks about The Sultanganj Buddha)