

THE DISTINCT ARTISTIC TRADITION OF KASHMIR AND ITS IMPACT IN TIBET

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Fig. 1 Buddha on the Cosmic Mountain; Kashmir; ca. 720; bronze with silver and copper inlay; height 13 1/4 in.(33.7 cm); The Norton Simon Foundation, Pasadena; F.1972.48.2.S; photograph courtesy The Norton Simon Foundation

BUDDHA ON THE COSMIC MOUNTAIN

Kashmir
ca. 720

SUMMARY

In the second half of the first millennium, the valleys of Kashmir produced some of the earliest and finest Buddhist art in the Himalayas. Art historian Christian Luczanits presents an eighth-century bronze Buddha statue with donor figures, possibly from the mountain kingdom of the Palola Shahis. The power of such Kashmiri images swept across Asia—Western Tibetan princes worshiped them, the lama-artist Tenth Karmapa copied them, and examples have been found as far away as Yunnan and Beijing

The depiction in the Norton Simon Museum is an extremely fine example of a Kashmir-style bronze. The wider region of Kashmir is well known for the high-quality artworks it produced in the second half of the first millennium. Combining idealized rounded forms with intricate detail, this school of art had a decisive impact on the artistic production of the western Himalayas, as represented in this publication by the temples of Tabo, Alchi, and Toling, as well as portable artworks related to them. Many of the Buddhist sculptures of the Kashmir region were preserved in Tibetan monasteries, where they partially remain.¹

The In this account, the term “Kashmir” signifies an area that goes beyond the Srinagar Valley, whose ruined monuments form the basis for our understanding of the artistic development of the region.² Further, among Kashmir-style bronzes, an important subgroup can be distinguished whose inscriptions assign them to the small Buddhist kingdom of the Palola Shahi, centered on the area of Gilgit. As these bronzes, the so-called Gilgit manuscripts, and rock along the river valleys indicate, this kingdom flourished from about 600 CE to about 820 CE, when Tibetan imperial troops arrived in the region.³ More important, their inscriptions name the rulers in a way that makes it possible to align the associated artworks in their relative succession and allow for the construction of an absolute chronology. The dates provided by these inscriptions refer

to the so-called Laukika era in two-digit numbers only, leaving the century attribution to stylistic and paleographic assessment.⁴

BUDDHA ON THE COSMIC MOUNTAIN

The Buddha depiction in the Norton Simon Museum (fig. 1) closely relates to the latest production of the Palola Shahi Kingdom (fig. 2). It is remarkable for the abundance of extremely fine inlay work and the crowded area around the Buddha's throne, both of which also appear in some Palola Shahi works. To appreciate the work fully, we must imagine an additional magnificent halo framing the main image that once was attached to the sculpture's back. It may have looked like a halo today preserved in a private collection (fig. 3).⁵



Fig. 2 Seated Buddha Flanked by Maitreya and Avalokiteśvara; Palola Shahi Kingdom; April 23, 715 (Laukika 91); brass with silver; height 14 1/2 in. (36.8 cm); Pritzker Collection; photograph by Pritzker Collection



Fig. 3 Halo with etched Buddha at Awakening and Attendants; Kashmir; ca. 720; brass, silver, copper; 14 7/8 x 9 5/8 x 3 3/8 in. (37.7 x 24.3 x 8.5 cm); Private collection; image after Heller 1999, no. 23

In this bronze, the Buddha and his pedestal have been cast separately, with tenons holding the image in place. The Buddha is seated cross-legged, with his right hand in the earth-touching gesture (*bhumisparsa mudra*). As is typical for Kashmir bronzes, his robe appears to cling to the body and falls in parallel folds, the hem expanding in a V shape on the covered shoulder and settling in a wide bow around the proper left thigh. Both the folding of the robe and the Buddha holding one end of the robe in his left hand are inherited from Gandharan depictions of the Buddha.

The pedestal is topped by a finely inlaid cushion that rests on an hourglass-shaped rock throne symbolizing Mount Meru, at the center of the Buddhist conception of the universe. At the sides of the throne, two bodhisattvas on double lotuses kneel with one leg, their inner hands directed palm up toward the Buddha. They may tentatively be identified as Maitreya, the future Buddha, and Avalokiteshvara, based on the flask standing in front of the left lower leg of the former and the jewel held in the left hand of the latter (fig. 2).



Fig. 4 Detail of Buddha on the Cosmic Mountain showing the pedestal; The Norton Simon Foundation, Pasadena, CA; F.1972.48.2.S; photography courtesy The Norton Simon Foundation

Directly underneath the right hand of the Buddha kneels the earth goddess holding a vase with both hands, confirming that the Buddha is here shown at the moment of his awakening (fig.4). At the same time, the female figure may also be the principal donor of the bronze, with her husband kneeling opposite her. The kneeling monk behind her would then need to be understood as their son, and the bearded elder man with a garland on the right as the father of one of the couple. Among the attributes held by the principal male figure, a short band forming a loop in the right hand and a staff with three projections in the left are puzzling, but they are shared by the figure engraved in the same position on the comparable halo illustrating the same event (fig. 3). Two musicians celebrating the event by playing a flute (not preserved) and cymbals sit between the donors. Obviously, this is only one potential reading of this group; others have been suggested in the literature.⁶ As such, this bronze presents the Buddha's awakening as a cosmic and eternal event, and thus alludes to a higher nature of Buddhahood.

A delightful element often found on Kashmir bronzes are the animals depicted among the rocks. Forming couples, they symbolize auspiciousness and, representing natural enemies side by side—the lions demonstratively cleaning themselves in the presence of deer—they also signal the calming effect of the Buddha's presence and teaching.

In comparison with inscribed bronzes of the Palola Shahi rulers, this piece lacks the specific details of the donors' dress characteristic of the latter. Moreover, analysis of the halo (fig. 3) surrounding the etched Buddha points to a Kashmir valley origin for it. The same comparisons also indicate a date of about 720 for the Norton Simon Buddha and the related halo.⁷ Regardless of the precise attribution, that the Norton Simon Buddha's folds fall off center links it closely to the Palola Shahi production. Ultimately, this

feature may have derived from Gandhara(fig. 3) and communicated via the Swat region.

KASHMIR BRONZES AND TIBET

Probably since the earliest Tibetan conquests of the region in the second quarter of the eighth century, bronzes like this one became collectibles in Tibetan areas. Exceptionally, we have a record of one such collector, Prince Nagaraja, one of two sons of the western Tibetan King Yeshe Wo (947–1019/1024). We know this from a substantial number of bronzes to which inscriptions were added that assigned them to his personal collection. A famous example in this regard is a standing Buddha today in the Cleveland Museum of Art (fig. 5).



Fig. 5 Standing Buddha; Kashmir; late 10th to early 11th century; brass with silver and copper inlay; height overall: 38 5/8 in. (98.1 cm), base: 11 1/8 in. (28.2 cm); Cleveland Museum of Art; John L. Severance Fund; 1966.30; CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0) Public Domain Dedication

Unusually, this elegant Buddha image shows extensive wear from daily ritual action. While this fact has been used to suggest an Indian usage of the image before it reached the western Tibetan kingdom, stylistic comparisons with other images likely from the early eleventh century indicate otherwise. Nagaraja, thus, may not only have carried an Indian name but also have followed Indian ritual procedures with this exceptional image. His bronzes were eventually distributed further across various Tibetan monasteries.⁸

Throughout the history of Tibetan art, Kashmir bronzes have been admired for their fine workmanship. The Tenth Karmapa, Choying Dorje (1604–1674), cited them in his paintings and sculptures, and they even inspired his distinctive sculptural style. In fact, the composition of the bronze today in the Norton Simon Museum or a very similar bronze is seen in a pedestal of one of the paintings attributed to the Karmapa's workshop (fig. 6) in the Lijiang Municipal Museum. In this painting only the inner four figures have been reproduced in reinterpreted form. Here, both donors are female, but the earth goddess is faithfully reproduced—the vase serving to hold a coral tree as offering—as is the figure opposite holding a short sticklike attribute in the same way as the male donor on the bronze. The musician couple is also directly comparable, as are the paired animals, birds on top and deer and lions at the bottom, the latter of different typology. Moreover, the robe of the Buddha represented in this painting is inspired by Kashmir bronzes (fig. 7), and his throne back resembles the halo from Kashmir (fig. 3).⁹



Fig. 6 Detail of the throne base in Shakyamuni Flanked by His Main Disciples; Tenth Karmapa workshop; Lijiang Municipal Museum; 2387-II; photograph by Lijiang Municipal Museum



Fig. 7 Tenth Karmapa's workshop; Shakyamuni Flanked by His Main Disciples; Lijiang, Yunnan Province; 17th century; ink and color on silk; 30 3/4x 20 1/2 in. (78 x 52 cm); Lijiang Municipal Museum; 2387-II; photograph by Lijiang Municipal Museum

Of course, Kashmir bronzes have been copied throughout the history of Tibetan art, with examples known from the western Himalayas and as far away as the Qing imperial court in Beijing. The impact of the art of Kashmir on Tibetan artistic production thus has been persistent and varied.

FOOTNOTES

¹ See Rob Linrothe, ed., *Collecting Paradise: Buddhist Art of Kashmir and Its Legacies*, Exhibition catalog (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2015) for the impact of the art of Kashmir on the Himalayas. For Kashmir sculpture in monasteries, see Khanchen Tsewang Rigzin, ed., *Hemis Museum*, Exhibition catalog (Leh: Hemis Monastery, n.d.); and Ulric von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet*, 2 vols. (Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 2001), vol. 1, 53–209. The dates provided for the Kashmir bronzes may differ from those of the respective museum, but are explained in the narrative.

² For a recent study on the stylistic development of the sculptural art of Kashmir see John Siudmak, *The Hindu-Buddhist Sculpture of Ancient Kashmir and Its Influences* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

³ See Oscar von Hinüber, *Die Palola Śāhis: Ihre Steininschriften, Inschriften auf Bronzen, Handschriftenkolophone und Schutzzauber; Materialien zur Geschichte von Gilgit und Chilas* (Mainz: Philip von Zabern, 2004) and numerous articles on individual bronzes by the same author for foundational work on the inscriptions from this small kingdom.

⁴ On the cyclical (astronomical) Laukika, respectively, Saptarsi, era used in the wider northwestern Indian region, see Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Other Indo-Aryan Languages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 196–97. To arrive at a date in the Common Era, twenty-four (twenty-five) years must be added to the number provided in the inscription.

⁵ Given their close stylistic and thematic association, the two objects have been tested to see if they fit together, but the halo turned out to be a bit too small for the bronze (Pratapaditya Pal, *The Arts of Kashmir*, Exhibition catalog (Milan: 5 Continents, 2007), 99n21, fig. 97.

⁶ See, for example, the descriptions in Pratapaditya Pal, ed., *Himalayas: An Aesthetic Adventure, Exhibition catalog* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago in association with University of California Press and Mapin Publications, 2003), no. 62, or John Siudmak, *The Hindu-Buddhist Sculpture of Ancient Kashmir and Its Influences* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 322–27.

⁷ A slightly earlier date, about 715, has been proposed in John Siudmak, *The Hindu-Buddhist Sculpture of Ancient Kashmir and Its Influences* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 322–27.

⁸ For a list of bronzes once in the collection of Nagaraja, see Ulric von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet*, 2 vols. (Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 2001), 84–87.

⁹ For a detailed study of the relation of the Tenth Karmapa's work to western Himalayan art, see Christian Luczanits, "Inspired by the Past: The Art of Chöying Dorjé and Western Himalayan Sculpture," in *The Tenth Karmapa and Tibet's Turbulent Seventeenth Century*, ed. Karl Debreczeny and Gray Tuttle (Chicago: Serindia, 2016), 107–51.

FURTHER READING

Linrothe, Rob. 2015b. "Introduction." In *Collecting Paradise: Buddhist Art of Kashmir and Its Legacies*, by Rob Linrothe, with essays by Melissa R. Kerrin and Christian Luczanits, 1–27. Exhibition catalog. New York: Rubin Museum of Art.

Siudmak, John. 2013. *The Hindu-Buddhist Sculpture of Ancient Kashmir and Its Influences*. Leiden: Brill.

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