

Rhode Island School of Design DigitalCommons@RISD

Channel

RISD Museum

4-25-2014

Head of Buddha Shakyamuni

RISD Museum

Gregory Schopen

Brown University, gregory_schopen@brown.edu

Vazira Zamindar

Brown University, vfyz@brown.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/risdmuseum_channel



Part of the [Sculpture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

RISD Museum; Schopen, Gregory; and Zamindar, Vazira, "Head of Buddha Shakyamuni" (2014). *Channel*. 26.
https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/risdmuseum_channel/26

This Transcript is brought to you for free and open access by the RISD Museum at DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Channel by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact mpompeli@risd.edu.

I'm Gregory Schopen. I am a professor of Religious Studies at Brown. And I am here looking at a piece of sculpture which is the head of a Buddha from a place called Gandhara in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent.

My first response is probably a common one: What a shame it is that these things come to us as fragments. We only get the works of a great civilization and religious tradition in piecemeal fashion, and we have to try to make some sense out of it.

There are two things on this head alone that would identify it as a Buddha immediately. One is what looks like a dot between his eyes. This is technically called an *urna*, and in some other Indian images this will appear as a third eye. And this protuberance on the head that only Buddhas have is called an *ushnisha*. There were all sorts of sanctions about looking down on the top of the Buddha's head, and even birds that flew over him would crash because they had done this.

So many of these pieces in museums are without any context whatsoever. If you are lucky enough to find these things in context, it changes the way in which you perceive them.

Even in modern India, if you go to a temple, these objects are treated as people. They're woken up in the morning; they're dressed in the morning; they're fed during the day at certain hours; they receive all forms of worship; at night they're put to bed. You don't do this with a piece of stone. This is clearly perceptual—conceptually not a work of art. But what happens is that they get stuck in museums and are perceived in that way. That's a legitimate way of perceiving them as an object in the modern world, but that's not the way they functioned in the culture, in the place out of which they came.

I'm Vazira Zamindar and I'm a historian at Brown University. And I'm looking at this beautiful specimen of a Gandharan Buddha head, a fragment of a Gandharan Buddha head.

I am really interested in the relationship between the aesthetic and the political. And in thinking about the aesthetic and the political, I'm drawn to the ways in which this body of sculpture and style became really a valued specimen for collections in Europe and the U.S. And this really begins in the late 18th, early 19th century when the British, when they arrive in India, they're looking for Alexander the Great's presence in India.

The other interest that was driving British explorers and their interest in this particular body of art is their interest in Buddhism.

Gandhara captured both the interest in Buddhism as well as captured the search for Alexander's presence by the Greek imprint in this body of art.

So every military expedition that went up the northwest part of India and up towards Afghanistan, was involved in some form of tomb hunting. And so you have Gandharan sculptures, really fragments, circulating westwards. And they're largely been ripped out of sites in stupas that are uncovered or found in this region. And you can see that this is an example of this because, one, it's clearly a sculpture that's been ripped off from a wall and there's nothing in the back, it's a flat head cut off. And there is a jagged break along the neck which shows that the head has been ripped off from the larger body that it would have been part of.

This is a very important piece in understanding the history of Indian art, but also the history of colonialism and history of the British Empire.