

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:



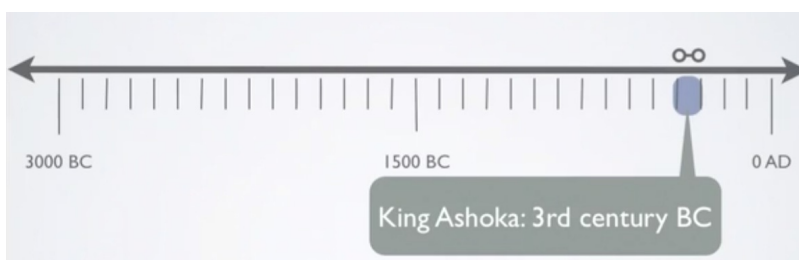
BIG IDEA

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 third century BC 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 BC and died in 483 BC.

Buddhism looks at 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 BC to 231 BC. The **Mauryan** Kingdom was the largest ancient Indian period. It was founded in 323 BC 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. The Pillars of Ashoka were monumental forms of architecture, large pillars about 30 to 40 feet tall. The **Ashokan Pillars** 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 connection, in this case a vertical connection, between heaven and earth. This connection is called **axis mundi**. The pillars, which were inscribed with these laws, or edicts, were located everywhere in order to ensure people were adhering to the laws.

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



Pillars of Ashoka

3rd century BC

Stone

Distributed throughout India



TERMS TO KNOW

Ashoka

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

Mauryan Period

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

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 third century BC.

➔ EXAMPLE Here is an example of a yakshi holding a fly whisk:





Yakshi Holding a Fly Whisk

250 BC

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. These are stylistic conventions that inspired later Buddhist art.



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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TERMS TO KNOW

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Pillars inscribed with the edicts by Mauryan king Ashoka.

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