

THE AESTHETICS OF BUDDHIST SCULPTURE

by

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There are two ways of appreciating old art; the one according to its antiquity, and the other according to its beauty. In general, archaeologists and historians are enthusiastic about very old objects because they represent for them the human activity of the past, while for an artist the value of an old object lies in the extent to which it is the expression of true beauty. The artist judges from an aesthetic point of view, while the archaeologists and historians judge from scientific principles. In this talk I propose to approach my subject from the aesthetic point of view, and to attempt to analyse, as I see it, the artistic value of Buddha-images.

Sometime ago I was asked by a friend of mine which of the many Buddha-figures created by the Eastern peoples gives the truest representation of the Blessed One. My answer was that we cannot refer to any particular type as being the best or truest, because art is the expression of different races, and different periods, and even more because it is the expression of individual artists. Just as there are unlimited manifestations of beauty in Nature, so there are in Art, and hence there can be no one type of Buddha-image which may lay claim to being ideal. Any type may be ideal so long as it is fine and spiritually expressive.

We have to keep in mind that a Buddha-image is not a real portrait of the Lord Buddha, but it is to be regarded rather as the portraiture of His Doctrine. It is the very spirit of the Buddhist religion that the artist has to convey in human form. Accordingly, we are to understand that this form is not intended to be realistic, but it is idealised and spiritualised, for otherwise it would not suggest an abstract idea. For this reason the Gandharan statues

inspired by Graeco-Roman art — an art that although idealised was nevertheless realistic — are in general not so spiritual as the Indian specimens of later periods.

The influence of these Gandharan Buddha-figures spread throughout the Indian schools of sculpture — schools that had already developed a proper art-form inspired principally from Nature — and in the natural progress of Indian sculpture the Gandharan prototype underwent a complete change, becoming a true Indian expression which saw its most radiant blossoming in the Gupta period. Since then its conventionalism of forms, of gesture, and of expression, and the peculiar adherence of the clothing to the bodily contours that characterises it, have become the accepted ideals of Buddhist art, ideals that undoubtedly are in complete accord with the serene and suave appearance of a perfect Buddha-image.

In remarking the simplicity of the anatomical rendering of the human figure in Indian sculpture we have to take into consideration the fact that the Indians as a race are fatter and more rounded, and therefore less muscular and bony in outline, than Europeans. Consequently, if the Greeks and the Indians had the same artistic ideals, as I think they had, their representations of the human form had necessarily to be different.

It must, of course, be admitted that the gradual establishment of inflexible canons in the representation of the Buddha in sculpture militated to a large extent against the production of original works, and, at the same time, it gave rise to the habit of copying or imitating. Imitation, instead of creation, became the rule. It was indeed natural that those peoples which received Buddhism from India, or from anywhere else, had to adopt also the imported art of that religion, and it was natural too that they should copy existing sculptural examples. The result was that their first productions were neither vivid nor free in expression, nor had they a proper style. After a period of transition the characteristics of those peoples were given greater play and their art thus became more original. Works produced in this later period can generally be said to be far

more valuable artistically than those produced earlier. For this reason, among the enormous quantity of Buddha-images that have been handed down to us, comparatively few examples are very fine, as the majority lack the power to inspire a true aesthetic or religious emotion: hence when we judge a Buddha-image we must not allow ourselves to be influenced by archaeological ideas, but must apply to it standards that take into consideration its real artistic and emotive values. (This rule, of course; is not so true of the arts that are free from a constant and unchangeable conventionalism.)

To take an example, Amaravati is one of the most renowned of the Indian schools, and one would therefore expect all the Buddha-images of that period to be fine specimens, but in actuality many of them are mere shapeless masses of stone, carved with innumerable folds of clothing. The instance of Amaravati may be extended to many other schools, if not to all of them. Such works of art are interesting as historical antiquities but not as representing art in the true meaning of the word.

Artistically and aesthetically the most satisfying of the Buddha-images are almost always those of the primitive and the classic periods. By "primitive" I mean the first period of creative production, and am not referring to incorrect and clumsy forms void of any artistic sensitiveness. Here in Siam I think we should consider primitive creative art to be represented almost exclusively by the statuettes in bronze of the Dvaravati school. These lovely bronzes are very attractive by reason of their naive and expressive rendering and for their delicate modelling. In these the artists, having passed through a period of imitation, had begun to be inspired by Nature. The peculiar shape of the head and the facial lineaments of these Buddha-images are definite characteristics of the Mon race, and do not belong to the Indian specimens. The hands, too, are very remarkable for the sensibility of their modelling, and here again we notice the artistic interpretation of Nature.

Dvaravati art gives us clear examples of what we mean by imitative and creative expressions. To the imitative period belong

most of the Buddha-images which the Mon people chiselled in stone after the Indian Gupta examples. In this more or less successful imitation of the Gupta examples we find the reason why there is no unity of style in these statues, and also why in each of them there is no good artistic relation between the body and the head. The figures also differ considerably from each other in type. Generally speaking, while the facial expression of each is fine and spiritual, the rest of the body does not possess high quality and is very inferior in anatomical form. This disparity of artistic values is entirely due to the fact that the artists were not expressing their personal feelings but were imitating the work of others. To the creative period of Dvaravati art belong the bronzes I have already referred to.

I have of course been speaking in general terms of the work of this school. In point of fact, there are examples of very remarkable stone figures of the Buddha, as for instance that beautiful statue at Wat Bovoranives, the head of which is as fine as any of the best Indian examples. But here, too, if we compare the head with the rest of the body we may notice a very great difference in artistic values.

Of course the value of the primitive, or not fully-developed, art cannot be compared with that of the classic specimens, in which we do not need to awaken our mind and our senses to see and feel things that are merely suggested by the artist. By means of their perfection of line and form, their harmony and their unity, the classical works master our senses and arouse in us strong emotions worthy of the subjects that they represent.

As I have already said, the subject represented by a Buddha-image, is in effect the portraiture of the Buddhist doctrine, because it is the very spirit of the religion that the artist has to convey by means of a human figure. This religious spirit seems to me to be so well synthesized in one of the Buddhist Sutras that I should like to quote a part of it in order to suggest the quality that should be possessed by a Buddha-image.

6 "Once the blessed One addressed the monks saying: "And what, O monks, is the laying down of the burden?"

"It is the complete absence of passion, the cessation, the giving-up, the relinquishment, forsaking, and non-adoption of desire.

"This, O monks, is called the laying-down of the burden."

How many Buddha figures express the spirit of this symbolic idea? Very few; the cause being, as already stated, that the artists in general imitated existing specimens without understanding the true meaning of their conventionalised forms and gestures. Consequently, but a few really great masters succeeded in creating spiritual statues.

In a brief speech such as this our criticism must necessarily be sketchy and limited, and so I propose to confine our discussion to one type only, and for this purpose I have chosen that of Sukhothai, as representing the greatest artistic manifestation that Siam has ever produced. There is no question that a fine Buddha-image of the Sukhothai period has every right to be designated a masterpiece.

As you perhaps know, the art of Sukhothai was at first inspired by examples from Ceylon and Chiengsen, but the Thai artists, while still respecting the old Indian ideals, soon turned their attention to the eternal source of beauty, to Nature, and by understanding the human form from life, and by endowing that form with a wonderful religious spiritualism, the Thai genius came to create one of the finest styles of Buddhist sculpture ever produced.

Aesthetically, the value of the Sukhothai figures in reference to plastic form, that is to say, in the rendering of the bony structure and of the simplified and stylised anatomical proportions, is really most remarkable, while in regard to the expression of the features they are unsurpassed in this or any other art form in the symbolic conveyance of abstract religious ideas. These wonderful figures appear almost not to belong to the material world. They seem to be visions, and the bronze to have become almost ethereal under the

magic touch of the artist, in whose hands sculpture has become the echo of the serene peace that came to Gautama after His complete Enlightenment.

In a fine example of this period every part is composed and blended in such manner that it harmonises with the unity of the whole, and the delicate undulation of the lines and the plastic volumes dominating the whole composition, gives a sense of airy vibration. The graceful waving of the outline starts from the typical flame-like halo and comes down gently to the head, where it is followed in the elegant form of the ear, the lobe of which is slightly curved outwards in order to soften the angle formed by the attachment of the neck with the shoulders. Thence it continues downwards to the right arm, the forepart of which is a little abducted to join with more harmony the mass of the leg. The effect is completed in the gentle curve of the superposed legs.

In this connexion, I should like to point out that there are specimens of Buddha-images belonging to other styles and other periods in which the legs are crossed, but although the statues may be very fine ones — I have in mind for example those of the Stupa of Borobudur and the famous image of Sarnath — the angle formed by the crossed legs disturbs to some little extent the harmony and unity of the whole composition. In other specimens the legs form merely a horizontal mass contrasting sharply and crudely with the vertical mass of the trunk. It is necessary to remember here that the contrast of masses, however important it may be in the representation of other subjects, has no part to play in Buddhist sculpture.

Returning again to the sense of undulation pervading the statues of Sukhothai we should observe also that the facial lineaments have the same characteristic. The lines of the mouth, of the base of the nose, of the eyes and of the forehead are all undulated and are almost parallel to each other. This is a very important characteristic, for no other kind of line has the same power of suggesting a sense of serenity in the features. Too much emphasis cannot be

given to the fact that the artists of Sukhothai tried to avoid any line or mass that would disturb the harmonious continuity of the composition of their figures.

We now come to a very important point that has a great bearing on the aesthetic value of Buddha-images, and it is a point which the old masters certainly took into consideration. It refers to the extent to which the different expressions of the face and the rigidity or relaxation of the body are related to the meaning of the work, or, more clearly, which moment in the life of the Buddha the figure is intended to represent. If the posture is that of meditation, meditation upon the cause of human suffering, then the body should not be fully relaxed, because this kind of meditation requires an active mental effort which also affects the muscular system. In such a posture the face should express some concentration of thought. Of Buddha-images in the posture of meditation those of Uthong are more admirable than the Sukhothai type, as their rigidity and slight thoughtfulness conforms better to the act of meditation. The large head at the National Museum, belonging to the Uthong period, is a wonderful example of the meditative expression, especially when seen from in front or from a three-quarters view. If on the other hand the posture is not that of meditation, but is that of after Enlightenment, then the stiffness and severity of the Uthong figures renders them far inferior to those of the Sukhothai type. As I have said, the Sukhothai figures do not suggest the idea of meditation, and indeed, the illumined spirit of the masters of Sukhothai seems to have recognised this truth, because in the main they avoided the creation of figures in the posture of meditation.

When the posture, or rather gesture, symbolises the Buddha after His Enlightenment, then, the body should be relaxed, because the muscular system has no reason to be tense, and the head should appear completely serene and abstract, and display almost imperceptible signs of inward spiritual contentment. The Buddha figures of Sukhothai are a perfect reflection of these spiritual qualities.

Before ending these brief critical notes, I should like to add one or two words on the best way of appreciating the artistic value of a Buddha-image.

As we all know, any kind of art can be fully appreciated only when it is seen, read, or listened to under proper circumstances. With regard to sculpture it is even more necessary than in the case of painting that works should be seen and studied under special lighting conditions. Owing to their three-dimensional nature it is necessary that the light should be allowed to fall upon them at an angle, preferably of 45 degrees, and, furthermore, as the work of sculpture is in monotone, the effect and the value of chiaroscuro is dependent exclusively on correct lighting conditions.

A Buddha figure has to be seen from in front or from a three-quarters view, and not in profile, because originally they were intended to be placed in niches, at the end of temples or chapels. Again, the statue must be placed at such a height that the station-point of the beholder is situated below the line of the legs, while his eyes must always be lower than those of the statue. The height at which a statue is placed should vary according to its size. Here the rule is that the larger the statue is, the higher its position should be. This is very important, as in the modelling of their statues the artists corrected as much as possible the effects of foreshortening. Accordingly, if Buddha-images are misplaced, as it must be admitted they generally are, we are denied the opportunity of gaining a full appreciation of their aesthetic and artistic value.
