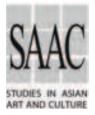# IN THE SHADOW OF THE GOLDEN AGE

ART AND IDENTITY IN ASIA FROM GANDHARA TO THE MODERN AGE

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Chapter 2

Buddhist Art Through a Modern Lens: A Case of a Mistaken Scholarly Trajectory

Susan L. Huntington

INTRODUCTION

From the eighteenth through the early twentieth century, British and other European scholars were deeply involved with attempting to understand India's ancient cultures. Intensive study of Sanskrit and other Indic languages led to the creation of dictionaries that are still the gold standard, and huge translation projects were undertaken to help explore India's literary, philosophical, and religious traditions. The contributions to knowledge made by these early scholars were enormous, and their work still informs the field of Indic studies today.

In addition to textual projects, archaeologists, numismatists, and epigraphers attempted to decode India's ancient culture through its artistic and other material remains. For the most part, these individuals worked close to their original sources, and we are greatly in their debt for their path-breaking and foundational work, much of which still shapes our studies to this day.

At the same time, an extraordinary thing happened with regard to the interpretation of the early Buddhist art of India, for I suggest that, suddenly, around the turn of the twentieth century, something in the scholarship went dramatically astray. This turning point may be traced to an essay titled "The Beginnings of Buddhist Art" published by French scholar Alfred Foucher in *Journal Asiatique* in 1911.[1] With this essay, what has come to be called the 'aniconic theory' was born, and Foucher forged a trajectory of scholarship on the early Buddhist art that has lasted for a hundred years. Accompanying this line of thinking came what I suggest are a cluster of unfounded claims about the early art and a series of misdirected questions.[2]

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[1]   Alfred Foucher, "The Beginnings of Buddhist Art." in *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art and Other Essays in Indian and Central Asian Archaeology*. This was first published in *Journal Asiatique* (Jan.–Feb. 1911). All references in this chapter will be to the 1917 edition (1917b: 1–29).

[2]   Among the unfounded claims is the idea that there had been a prohibition, or, if not a prohibition, at least a reticence against including figurative images of Śākyamuni Buddha.

Puzzled because archaeologists had not found Buddha images in their excavations of early Buddhist sites, Foucher hypothesised both an interpretation of the early Buddhist art of India to characterise this absence and a theory of the origin of the Buddha image. That a similar set of interpretations was never formulated for, let us say, Jaina art or the art of Hinduism is an important issue for, despite the fact that no early images of the Jinas nor of Śiva, Viṣṇu, Durgā, and other Hindu divinities appear in the early periods of Indian art, no one has suggested a period of aniconism for these other Indic religions. Instead, the earliest known images of the Jinas and various Hindu divinities are not seen as 'firsts' after a deliberate period of absence but rather as part of an artistic continuum that is difficult to trace but that likely included works in ephemeral materials, such as wood. In contrast, in the case of Buddhism, an elaborate theory about the 'absence' of the Buddha in the early art and the 'origin' of the Buddha image has come to dominate scholarly thinking.

Despite any inconsistencies, Foucher's two-pronged theory not only quickly took root but it has continued to underpin both art historical and Buddhological studies of these ancient materials to the present day. However, I think that Foucher and the others who have followed him were wrong about what they believed they were seeing—or, more correctly, not seeing—in the archaeological and art historical record. Over the past twenty years, my work has challenged the aniconic theory as it applies to the early narrative art at sites like Sanchi and Bharhut.[3] Yet, despite what I feel is convincing archaeological evidence and documentation for my view and very weak evidence for the old paradigm, the aniconic theory remains entrenched in scholarly thinking. Criticism and commentary on my theory has, to a large extent, accepted certain aspects of my interpretation while steadfastly clinging to the traditional idea that the art must be about Śākyamuni and his life, and, therefore, that the art is peculiar because it does not show him in human form.[4]

This claim has been disproved in John C. Huntington, "The Origin of the Buddha Image: Early Image Traditions and the Concept of Buddhadarśanapunyā." (1985a). Among what I believe are misdirected questions is the very issue of why no Buddha image appears in the narrative scenes at Sanchi, Bharhut, and other sites, as I explain in this essay and my other writings, for which please see the Bibliography accompanying this essay.

[3] For my publications on these issues please see the Bibliography. Much of the research and time for study of these materials has been funded by a number of agencies. I am grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton (with funding provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation) in particular for providing me with the time and resources to pursue this work.

[4] For example, see Vidya Dehejia, "Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems." (1991: 45–66).

In keeping with the golden age conference theme, which, in part, explores the confrontation with the 'other', this essay looks at how, beginning with Foucher, modern Western authors created categories and hierarchies of art whereby the Indic art was judged to be inferior compared with what were held to be the higher aesthetic and communicative standards of the European tradition. Foucher's theory that the Indians were incapable of inventing a figurative image of Śākyamuni and that the origin of the Buddha image should be traced to Greek inspiration precisely reflects both the privileging of the Western traditions and a perceived inferiority of the Indians and their artistic creativity. Although there is a lengthy history to the so-called aniconic theory, with scholars along the way adding inferences and interpretations to it, this essay concentrates on the early period of the formulation of the theory and the two key players: Alfred Foucher and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. I have selected these two authors because of the pivotal roles their work played regarding the interpretation of the early Buddhist art of India but also because their writings are pertinent to the issue of categories and hierarchies and therefore the golden age conference theme. On the one hand, Foucher attributed the origin of the figurative image to a Western source. In response, Coomaraswamy argued for an Indian origin for the Buddha image. Although Coomaraswamy rightly countered Foucher's racist claims, his position likely reflected his own nationalistic view of the situation.

In this examination, I first provide an interpretation of the early art that I believe is more fitting as an understanding of the material remains. I then review some of the arguments and presuppositions put forth by Foucher and Coomaraswamy. Finally, I puzzle over why scholarly theories might gain traction not simply because of the evidence at hand but because of emotional attachments to paradigms that lie outside the scholarly evidence. As I shall show, issues of nationalism, racism, and power came to play a major role in the evolution of aniconic thinking for over a century. This paper, then, re-examines the established views, contextualises them within the intellectual climate of their day, and lays the ground for a new paradigm to set the study of early Buddhist art on what I consider to be a more accurate trajectory.

THE ANICONIC THEORY AND A NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE ART

Let us review some of the presuppositions of the aniconic theory. Following Foucher's lead, scholars have puzzled over the absence of anthropomorphic representations of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni in the earliest surviving Buddhist narrative art. Whether or not such images were ever made, the early

Plate 2.1   Left: Relief showing assembly of male lay practitioners. Stūpa 1 at Sanchi. West gateway, south pillar, north face, middle panel. Ca. second-third decade of first century CE.

artistic corpus dating from around the second century BCE to the first century CE as known to us today does not contain a single representation of a Buddha figure. This is not a fact that I dispute; rather, I seek explanations other than those that have been proposed. That the stone relief carvings in question were Buddhist in nature may be inferred from the fact that they are without exception found at Buddhist sites and nearly always associated with the decorative scheme

Plate 2.1 Right: Relief showing Śākyamuni Buddha overcoming Māra (Māravijaya). From Gandhara region, Pakistan. Ca. second-third century CE Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

of Buddhist *stūpa*s. The carvings sometimes adorn the gateways and railings of *stūpa* monuments, for example, at sites such as Sanchi and Bharhut, or they may have been placed directly on the monuments themselves, as at Amaravati and other sites in southeastern India. Although none of the carvings shows figurative representations of the Buddha, the art abundantly depicts sacred trees, Buddhist *stūpa* monuments, and other objects as the focus of veneration. Early Buddhist art, then, it has been assumed, either avoided Buddha images entirely, or employed symbols to refer to the Buddha or important events in the Buddha's life.

For example, depictions of various trees in early stone reliefs were interpreted to signify the Buddha's enlightenment, or, more technically correct, the victory over Māra, which took place beneath the *bodhi* tree at Bodh Gaya (Plate 2.1, left). The tree as the central and principal object of focus in the artistic compositions was seen as a substitute for what should have been a figurative representation of Śākyamuni Buddha. At the same time, the empty platform in front of the tree has been interpreted as a deliberate absence, whereby the

artists depicted a place for but did not include a figurative Buddha. That the two types of portrayal—substitution for a figure by a non-figurative symbol as well as an actual absence—might occur in the same composition (thus implying that there should be two, not one, representations of a Buddha) was never explained. Further, the activities and nature of the figures in these scenes were ignored, even when they clearly differed from textual narratives of the Buddha life event.

In the same way, portrayals of a wheel in many of the sculptured reliefs were thought to symbolise the Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath, at which he is said to have turned the wheel of law into motion (Plate 2.3, left). As in the case of the depictions of trees, the wheels that served as the artistic focus in the works of art were interpreted as 'aniconic' substitutes for an anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha. The identification and activities of the participants in these compositions were ignored, as scholarly attention focused instead on the idea that the wheel was a substitute for what should have been a figurative depiction of Śākyamuni Buddha and that the composition was intended to show a major life event of the Buddha.

A third object, and one of the most common in this early artistic corpus, is the Buddhist *stūpa*, that is, the type of reliquary monument created to house the Buddha's cremated remains. Such depictions are normally interpreted as portrayals of the Buddha's death, with the *stūpa* serving as a non-figurative symbol to indicate the death scene, or *parinirvāṇa*, of Śākyamuni (Plate 2.5, left). Yet the varieties of *stūpa* forms shown in the art and the many types of activities of the human participants in the scenes have not been satisfactorily explained in relation to the death of the Buddha by the scholars arguing for the aniconic interpretation.

In addition to trees, wheels, and *stūpa*s, other non-figurative motifs, such as empty seats or footprints, were interpreted by early scholars as portrayals of Śākyamuni Buddha and his life events, but without the figure of the Buddha shown. Other subject matter that appears in the early narrative corpus was also interpreted as alternatives to what should have been a focus on the historical Buddha Śākyamuni and scenes showing the main events of his last life. Thus, representations of *jātaka*s, or stories of Śākyamuni Buddha's previous births, were also interpreted with an aniconic slant since they do not show him in his last life.

Because there is no single place in the history of the aniconic scholarship where the entire theory was presented and applied to the art in a coherent, holistic fashion, there are numerous anomalies that become visible immediately if one begins to look beneath the surface. For example, although never clearly articulated in the scholarship on the so-called aniconic art, the theory, as

suggested above, encompasses two possibilities: first, that a non-figurative object is intended to substitute for an anthropomorphic representation of Śākyamuni, and, second, that an empty space is meant to imply his presence without a figurative depiction. In situations where a single composition has both conditions (Plate 2.1, left), we must wonder whether such a sculpture should in fact have had two depictions of a figurative Buddha or whether the scholarship has simply glossed over an important anomaly.

The many discrepancies among the various depictions that are all considered to represent the same event in the life of Śākyamuni are also not explained clearly. Thus, the considerable number of representations of trees, regardless of the varieties of tree species shown in the art, and the many differences among the activities of the participants in the scenes, are all said to denote the same Buddha life event—that is, the Buddha's enlightenment. While it is not possible to illustrate the many examples here, a simple glance at the artistic corpus makes it clear that not all of the trees depicted are the *ficus religiosa*, that is, the *bodhi* tree of Śākyamuni Buddha, nor are the activities in the scenes all the same (S. Huntington 2012). Similarly, discrepancies and variations among the scenes that show wheels, *stūpa*s, and other subjects make it unlikely that the many variations all represent a single subject, most notably, the first sermon in the case of scenes with wheels or the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha in examples where a *stūpa* is depicted.

Because scholarly attention has centred entirely on the object of veneration in the artistic compositions but not the activities of the human participants I believe that the basic subject matter has been further misunderstood (S. Huntington 2012). It is notable that the figures in the known corpus are never monks or nuns, but always members of the laity, who are normally shown in acts of veneration or celebration at the monuments or objects shown as the focus of the carvings. Further, I know of no instance where the figures in what have been considered Buddha life events are similar to the figures in representations that in fact do show such scenes (Plates 2.1, right; 2.3, right and 2.5, right).

Although Foucher himself did not introduce the word aniconism into the scholarly literature—it seems to have been a later addition by Coomaraswamy—Foucher's concern was with the absence of the figurative form of the Buddha. But the use of the term aniconic by proponents of the theory has, I believe, created a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding regarding the art. For aniconicists, the term icon is considered equivalent to a human figure and the term aniconic implies the absence of a human figure. And, of course, in that sense I agree that the art is aniconic because the trees, *stūpa*s, and other subjects are not humans. But what aniconicists contend when they talk about the early Buddhist art is

Plate 2.2   Left: Relief showing assembly of male lay practitioners.
Stūpa 1 at Sanchi. West gateway, south pillar, north face, middle
panel. Ca. second-third decade of first century CE.

that the non-figurative subjects in the art are intended to substitute for a human
figure, an assumption with which I disagree. Simply, something can be non-
figurative in form but not a substitute for an anthropomorphic being.

Further, in discussions of aniconicism in the early Buddhist art, the term
icon has also been loosely implied to carry another definition of the term, that
is, something that is highly regarded, unique, and worthy of veneration. In

Plate 2.2   Right: Assembly at the *bodhi* tree at Bodh Gaya.

discussions of the aniconic theory as it applies to the early Buddhist art of India, the two meanings have sometimes been conflated. And yet, as is well known, something that is not figurative can be an icon in the sense of being an epitome and a focus of devotion, respect, and honour, and a human need not necessarily be an icon in the second sense of the term. Indeed, this is exactly what I propose. In other words, I see the trees, *stūpas*, and other subjects depicted in the art not as substitutes or symbols for a figurative Buddha but as important foci of devotion in their own right. They are, in my view, icons in the second sense of

the term. In other words, I argue that the trees, *stūpa*s, wheels, pillars, and other foci of the narrative reliefs in the early artistic corpus are in fact icons and that the art is aniconic only if one adheres to the definition of an icon as equivalent to something that is anthropomorphic. The extrapolations made by other scholars that these forms are symbols for a human figure are, I suggest, false.

Regardless, and perhaps more importantly, I propose that the overwhelming subject of the art was not, in fact, intended to be the life and life events of Śākyamuni Buddha. Rather, I believe that the art shows completely different types of subject matter and that these subjects do not require a Buddha figure nor even something that substitutes for him. The question of whether there were early Buddha images and where the first ones might have been made is an entirely different matter.

The issues can be clarified by examining three sets of comparisons (Plates 2.1, 2.3, and 2.5). In each of these three examples, the earlier, so-called aniconic sculpture appears on the left, and a later sculpture showing a figurative representation of Śākyamuni and an event in his life appears on the right. According to the aniconic theory, the Buddha image—seen on the right in each pair—was a late addition to the Buddhist artistic repertoire, replacing the presumed aniconic phase. For each set, I will supply the traditional interpretation of the subject matter of these carvings that has prevailed for more than one hundred years in the scholarly literature. Following that, I will reinterpret the reliefs.

In the first comparison (Plate 2.1), the sculpture on the left shows a group of seated male devotees assembled around an empty platform situated in front of a tree, with human figures portrayed in postures of devotion and seated around the tree. In the scene on the right, there is another platform with a tree above it, but in this case there is also a figure of a seated Buddha upon the platform. This scene also contains other human figures.

The traditional interpretation of these reliefs, and many others similar to them, is that both are representations of one of the most important events in the life of Śākyamuni Buddha. That is, it has been believed for more than a century that these compositions both show the enlightenment of the Buddha, which occurred while he sat beneath a type of fig tree known commonly as the *bodhi* tree.[5] However, according to the aniconic theory, the scene on the left shows the enlightenment—Māravijaya—of the Buddha without the figure of the Buddha

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5   More correctly, the scene should not be called the enlightenment but rather the victory over Māra (Māravijaya), which occurred just prior to the actual enlightenment.

included, while that on the right, dating from around two hundred years later, shows the scene complete with the figure of the Buddha.

A second comparison (Plate 2.3) shows a scene with a large wheel on the left, and human devotees showing reverence to it. A herd of deer appears below. On the right, the comparative composition shows a seated Buddha on a platform, again with human devotees, and in this case a wheel is inscribed on the front of the platform, flanked by a pair of deer. In the traditional interpretation, the wheel is said to denote the first sermon, at which time the Buddha 'turned the wheel of law' into motion. Based on the presence of the wheel in both compositions, the traditional interpretation of these two scenes, which has been in place for over a hundred years, is that both show the event of the Buddha's first sermon. However, because it was believed that the Buddha in his human form was not shown during the earlier period, the scene on the left is said to depict only the wheel as a substitute for an anthropomorphic depiction, while that on the right, dating from a later period, shows the Buddha himself as well as the wheel symbolic of his first sermon as an emblem beneath the figure. The deer in both sculptures likely refer to Sarnath, where the Buddha's teaching occurred at the so-called 'Deer Park'.

In a third comparison (Plate 2.5), the sculpture on the left shows a Buddhist *stūpa* as the main object of devotion. On the right, the Buddha reclines on his deathbed, surrounded by his devotees. As before, even though the two compositions differ greatly, they have been given the same interpretation for more than a century, for both are said to represent the Buddha's death (*parinirvāṇa*). Again, based on the presumption that the Buddha was not shown in human form during the earlier period, the scene on the left has been said to avoid showing the Buddha directly but instead refers to his death by depicting a *stūpa*, that is, the type of monument that was created to house his cremated remains. On the right, the scene with the reclining Buddha represents the death itself.

As appealing as the above interpretations appear, let me discuss these three sets of sculptures again, and give you my alternative interpretation.

A re-analysis of the first pair of sculptures, the so-called representation of the Buddha's enlightenment, indicates to me that the carvings represent two completely different subjects (Plate 2.1). That on the right, with the Buddha present, clearly represents the Buddha's enlightenment, or, to be more technically correct, the moment just before the Buddha's enlightenment when he overcame Māra. Distinctive elements of the scene that are identified with that event include the presence of the Buddha beneath the tree of enlightenment with his right hand extended downward in the earth-touching gesture, which he is said to have performed just prior to his enlightenment as if calling the earth to witness

the forthcoming event. Surrounding him is a multitude of figures and animals who wield weapons. Again, these figures conform to traditional accounts of the Buddha's enlightenment for, when his enlightenment was imminent, the god of death, Māra, supposedly sent his army to attack the Buddha and prevent him from attaining the state of perfect knowledge—and immortality.

In contrast, the sculpture on the left bears no distinctive elements relating to the enlightenment. Not only are the characteristic leaves of the Buddha's enlightenment tree absent but nothing else in the scene conforms to the narratives of the event found in Buddhist texts. The figures are not wielding weapons, but, rather, are grouped in what appears to be a devotional assembly at a sacred site marked by a tree with a platform in front of it. Simply, I interpret this scene and many others similar to it as depictions of the sacred objects and places of Buddhism and the devotions accorded them by lay practitioners and religious pilgrims. The fact that the figures in this scene and the others among the early corpus are all members of the laity—no monks or nuns are shown—is of interest in the study of this early art (S. Huntington 2012).

The spot where the Buddha once sat is even today marked by the empty seat in front of the sacred tree, which is believed to be a descendant of the original, and devotees come from all over the Buddhist world to honour this place and the tree that sheltered the Buddha during his final meditations leading to his enlightenment (Plate 2.2, right). Before the days of photography, such devotional gatherings might have been shown by the ancient artists in sculptures like that on the left.

The second comparison also bears reinterpretation (Plate 2.3). The sculpture on the right clearly shows a key event in the Buddha's life, his first sermon. The composition contains the main elements of the narrative as known from Buddhist texts, including the holy men who were the Buddha's first disciples, here shown as shaven-headed monks, among others. The event occurred at the Deer Park at Benares, here indicated by the two deer depicted beneath the Buddha's throne. And, of course, the Buddhist wheel between the two deer indicates that the first sermon is the event being depicted.

In contrast, the carving on the left bears none of the elements that can identify it unequivocally as a representation of the Buddha's first sermon. The main focus of the scene is not simply a wheel but one that has been mounted atop a pillar. Often called Aśokan pillars because most are believed to have been erected during the third century BCE reign of Emperor Aśoka, such pillars are well known among the archaeological remains from ancient India (Plate 2.4, right). The human participants in this scene suggest that the carving represents lay devotions at one of the 'Aśokan' pillars, likely erected at a site where a Buddhist

teaching had taken place, perhaps even Sarnath itself. If my interpretation is correct, the wheel and pillar would not be substitutes for a human figure of a Buddha, but, rather, are the focus of attention in their own right. In contrast to the archaeological stillness seen in the modern photograph on the right, we can imagine that human devotees might once have gathered at one of the large, monolithic pillars at a Buddhist site to pay their respects as seen in the early carving. That the 'Aśokan' pillars were often surmounted by large wheels is suggested from archaeological evidence. Like the previous example that I have reinterpreted, the scene emphasises Buddhist devotions at sacred sites, but does not depict a biographical scene of the Buddha's life. In fact, because we know that some of the early carvings refer to other historical Buddhas, we cannot even be certain that such a sculpture refers to Śākyamuni (S. Huntington 2012).

The third set of images lends itself to an even more compelling analysis (Plate 2.5). The scene on the right clearly shows the death of the Buddha, with the Buddha lying on his right side as described in Buddhist texts, and surrounded by his grieving followers. I hardly need point out that the composition on the left bears none of these features. Instead, it shows an architectural monument precisely like those that were created to house the cremated remains of the Buddha after his death. The presence of human devotees playing music in celebration has no correspondence to literary sources that describe the death scene of the Buddha, who was at that time surrounded by monks and other devotees expressing their grief. Like the two scenes I analysed above, it is highly unlikely that this composition shows a Buddha life event. Rather, more probably, it shows the later veneration of a sacred monument created to house the Buddha's cremated ashes.

Such Buddhist monuments abound at sites throughout the Buddhist world. The sculpture and nearly all of the others known to us today were in fact part of the decoration of such structures (Plate 2.6, right), and I propose that it is precisely such a monument that is depicted in the sculpture. Such monuments are foundational in Buddhism and occur everywhere that Buddhism has travelled. The form of such reliquary mounds changed as Buddhism expanded to various regions, becoming, for example, the pagoda that is characteristic of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Buddhist art. And at these sites we see people even today circumambulating them, making offerings, and performing devotions to these sacred monuments and the relics contained within. It is not surprising, then, that given the importance of such sites in Buddhist practice, *stūpa* monuments and their devotees are a common subject in Buddhist art, as seen in this and many other early examples (S. Huntington 2012).

Plate 2.3 Left: Relief showing veneration of a pillar topped
with a wheel. Stūpa 1 at Sanchi. South gateway, west
pillar, south face, top panel. Ca. second-third decade of first
century CE.

THE NEW INTERPRETATION AND THE BUDDHIST
RELIC TRADITION

In my view, it is difficult to support the position that the tree, wheel, and *stūpa*
in the early reliefs are substitutes for figurative representations of the Buddha
and that the varieties of lay activities we find in these compositions in any way

Plate 2.3 Right: Relief showing first teaching of Śākyamuni Buddha. From Gandhara region, Pakistan. Ca. second-third century CE. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

relate to the details of Buddha life events. Yet the aniconic theory encodes the expectation that a figurative image of the Buddha must be of primary importance and that other depictions, such as a *bodhi* tree or a *stūpa*, are secondary substitutes for a figurative form rather than valid subjects in their own right.

However, instead of assuming that the early artists depicted trees, reliquary mounds, footprints, and other subjects as substitutes for a figurative image, my work explores the importance of these 'other subjects' in their own right. Rather than hypothesising that they comprise a kind of Plan B approach in place of a Plan A human form, I have concluded that they reflect core practices that lie at the heart of Buddhism.

Plate 2.4 Left: Relief showing veneration of a pillar topped
with a wheel. Stūpa 1 at Sanchi. South gateway, west
pillar, south face, top panel. Ca. second-third decade of first
century CE.

Specifically, I suggest that the key to interpreting these early artistic remains
lies in an understanding of the role of relics in the practice of Buddhism, for relic
veneration lies at the core of this religious tradition that traces its belief system
and teachings to a historical being. Buddhists explicitly identify two primary
categories of physical relics—namely, bodily relics of the Buddha (śarīraka) and
relics by contact with the body of the Buddha or use by him (pāribhogika) (S.

Plate 2.4   Right: Pillar at Vaisali.

Huntington 2012). Buddhists also consider the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha (the *dharma*) and the *saṁgha*, or Buddhist monastic community that he founded, to be additional types of relics. Some traditions also classify images of the Buddha and other reminders that do not have physical associations with the Buddha as an important relic category (*uddesika*).

Based on the abundant evidence in the art itself, I suggest that one of the principal categories of subject matter in the early narrative carvings is devotion to the two most important types of relics. Devotion to the bodily relics of

Plate 2.5 Left: Relief showing musical celebration at a Buddhist *stūpa*. Stūpa 1 at Sanchi. North gateway, west pillar, inner face, top panel. Ca. second-third decade of first century CE.

Śākyamuni (and perhaps the relics of other Buddhist luminaries) is portrayed in the many scenes that show devotion to Buddhist *stūpa*s and (by implication) the bodily relics within (S. Huntington 2012). Devotion to relics of contact or use is portrayed by the many scenes that show devotion to sacred trees, footprints, and other objects.

The first type of relic, the bodily relic, is the most important type of relic in Buddhism, and consists of the cremated ashes of the Buddha, his tooth, hair, a

Plate 2.5 Right: Death of Śākyamuni Buddha (Parinirvāṇa). From Gandhara region, Pakistan. Ca. second-third century CE. Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

fingernail, and any other remnant of his physical being in his last life and even his previous lives. Such relics have been collected and enshrined in reliquaries, and the most characteristic architectural form in Buddhism—the *stūpa*—was created to house them. Based on the ubiquity of such monuments throughout the Buddhist world, I propose that the artistic renderings we see in ancient India are in fact representations of such monuments and the relic veneration practices that occur at them and not—as others have proposed—depictions of the death scene of the Buddha.

The second most important type of relic is the relic by contact, by which Buddhists mean anything the Buddha had ever touched or used. Such objects, most particularly the tree under which the Buddha sat when he became enlightened, have been honoured and revered over the millennia by Buddhist

Plate 2.6 Left: Relief showing musical celebration at a Buddhist
stūpa. Stūpa 1 at Sanchi. North gateway, west pillar, inner face, top
panel. Ca. second-third decade of first century CE.

devotees. And I contend that representations of such objects in the art are not
substitutes for Buddha images but, rather, are the focus of veneration in their
own right. Indeed, as the most important tool used by the Buddha in his final
quest for enlightenment, the *bodhi* tree is even today one of the most renowned
focal points of devotion in Buddhism, attracting throngs of visitors from across
the globe each year (Plate 2.2, right).

Plate 2.6   Right: View of Stūpa 1 at Sanchi. North gateway and entrance.

FOUCHER AND COOMARASWAMY AND THE 'ANICONIC' THEORY

If my interpretation of the art is correct, one has to ask, then, how more than a century of scholarship has been so misguided. By examining the writings of two early twentieth-century authors, Alfred Foucher—the founder of the theory of what has come to be called aniconism (Plate 2.7, left)—and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (Plate 2.7, right), we can understand the important role that their personal and cultural predilections played in the creation and perpetuation of the aniconic theory. While an understanding of the social, political, and cultural factors surrounding the formulation of the aniconic theory alone is not enough to unseat the theory from its hallowed place in Indian art history, by means of this historiographic approach it can be demonstrated that the development and passionate advocacy of the aniconic theory involved an array of social, cultural, and political factors that were not directly pertinent to the issue of aniconism itself. Such cultural biases led early scholars to presume a prohibition against creating Buddha images, a claim not supported by Buddhist texts and practice (J. Huntington 1985), and, also, to deny the powerful evidence of what was actually shown in the art.

Plate 2.7 Left: Alfred Foucher, who founded the aniconic theory and argued for a Greek-influenced origin of the Buddha image.

Although nineteenth-century Western writers had observed the absence of Buddhas in the early art of India, the first scholar to propound the theory of aniconism was the Frenchman Alfred Foucher. Originally presenting his ideas in the short essay entitled "The Beginnings of Buddhist Art" published in *Journal Asiatique* in 1911 (Foucher 1917b), Foucher further developed the theory in the chapters he wrote for John Marshall's monumental three-volume work on the artistic remains at Sanchi, published in 1940 (Marshall & Foucher 1940).

My discussion of Foucher's work will be organised around three assumptions that saturate his writings and which, I believe, profoundly affected his interpretations of the art. Ultimately attributable to the social, cultural, and political climate of his day, these theoretical suppositions, I suggest, led him astray from the intrinsic meaning of the art.

Plate 2.7 Right: Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, who supported the aniconic theory and argued for an Indian origin of the Buddha image.

The first of the three assumptions was Foucher's belief that the subject matter of the early Buddhist art of India was necessarily focused on the life of the Buddha. Writing in Marshall's Sanchi volume, Foucher says that the donors of the art expected the artists "to decorate the surroundings of a Buddhist monument with scenes taken from the life (or rather the lives) of the Śakya-muni" (Marshall & Foucher 1940 I: 193). He notes that "in the numerous reliefs decorating these [the Sanchi] gates we shall find our artists more than ever at grips with the problem of showing the biography of the Buddha without portraying the Buddha himself" (Marshall & Foucher 1940 I: 193).

He further proposes that: "In Buddhism, a religion with a founder […] worship is naturally addressed to the Master" (Marshall & Foucher 1940 I: 180–181). Claiming that "the devotion of the faithful […] fastened […] on the

four essential episodes [of the Buddha's life]: the Nativity, the Enlightenment, the First Sermon and the Last Decease […]" (Marshall & Foucher 1940 I: 181). Foucher classified many of the compositions on the gateways of the Sanchi monuments according to the four major life events of the Buddha, namely, the Birth, Enlightenment, First Sermon, and Death (Marshall & Foucher 1940 I: 181, 195–196). I have already discussed scenes that Foucher would have considered to represent the enlightenment (or, more correctly, the Māravijaya), the first sermon, and the death.

Because he believed that the compositions on the gateways show life scenes of the Buddha, Foucher not surprisingly discussed the reliefs in chronological order of the four main events in the life of the Buddha—but not according to the actual arrangement of the reliefs on the monuments. Lumping together the four gateways adorning Stūpa I and the one in front of Stūpa III, Foucher says that:

> This enumeration will relate to all five *toraṇas* at once, without distinction […] Our first care must be to introduce some order and clarity into a decorative whole which at first sight […] gives an impression as much of confusion as of profusion
>
>   (Marshall & Foucher 1940 I: 194).

I suggest that the confusion Foucher perceived arose from his assumption that the scenes showed Buddha life events, and that they should have been displayed in chronological order according to the life of the Buddha. In other words, Foucher's belief that the scenes depicted life events was so strong that he abandoned studying the monument as its artists had intended and instead superimposed his own organisation. Thus, Foucher's study completely ignores the actual arrangement of the reliefs and concentrates on trying to identify the individual scenes as representations of Buddha life events. By classifying so many of the reliefs according to the four life events, Foucher found it necessary to dismiss the many differences among the compositions by saying that the artists "remain faithful to the spirit, if not always to the letter" in their depictions of Buddha life events (Marshall & Foucher 1940 I: 189). For example, he claims that although numerous distinct tree species are shown in the carvings, such as the mango tree, the artists nonetheless intended for them to denote the fig tree under which the Buddha meditated and achieved his enlightenment. Specifically, Foucher notes in one case that "[although the tree] is not [by] any chance *ficus religiosa* […] it is clearly meant for the one which sprang up" at Bodh Gaya (Marshall & Foucher 1940 I: 189).

The second premise that profoundly affected Foucher's development of the aniconic theory was his assumption that it was abnormal not to show the Buddha. That Foucher perceived the absence of the Buddha image as an aberration is stated in his "Beginnings of Buddhist Art" where he notes that when "we find the ancient stone-carvers of India in full activity, we observe that they were very industriously engaged in carrying out the strange undertaking of representing the life of Buddha without Buddha" (Foucher 1917: 4). In his foundational essay, Foucher states unequivocally that "the ancient Indian sculptors abstained absolutely from representing either Bodhisattva or Buddha in the course of his last earthly existence" (Foucher 1917: 5). He further comments that "Such is the abnormal, but indisputable fact of which every history of Buddhist art will have at the outset to render account" (Foucher 1917: 5). Characterising this phenomenon as a "monstrous abstention" (Foucher 1917: 7), Foucher read into the reliefs what a European of his day—unacquainted with the practices of early Buddhism—might have expected the art to depict. Likening the artistic phenomenon, for example, of showing a *stūpa* as in a relief, to anomalies in the animal world, Foucher describes it as a "typical case of artistic teratology" (Foucher 1917: 8). By using the biological term teratology—that is, the study of malformations, monstrosities, or serious deviations from the norm in organisms—Foucher impugns the legitimacy of the Indian artistic tradition.

Foucher's premise that the lack of a Buddha image reflected an abnormality became the foundation stone for the view that the art created by these early Buddhists was a substitute for something else that had been deliberately avoided. Rather than seeing the Indic art tradition for what it was and what it tried to express, Foucher measured it according to criteria that I suggest were completely inappropriate to the Indian situation.

Although later writers have commonly assumed that the absence of the Buddha image was due to religious interdictions, Foucher attributed the phenomenon to a lack of imagination on the part of the Indians and their servile attitude toward precedent and tradition. With an air of superiority that smacks of blatant racism to us today, Foucher claimed that the Indian artists were incapable of the type of innovation needed to produce a Buddha image.

This view was at the heart of Foucher's third assumption, that Western civilization was superior to Indian civilization. Echoing a view shared with many other Europeans of his day, Foucher's bias predisposed him to trace those things he saw as good about Indian civilization to a Western source, and those he saw as inferior or 'abnormal' to indigenous developments, such as the Buddha-less carvings we find in the early artistic corpus. In particular, Foucher, like many

Plate 2.8 Left: Image of Buddha. From Gandhara region, Pakistan. Ca. second-third century CE. Private Collection, Japan.

other nineteenth-century European Romantics and intellectuals, privileged Greek culture. For these individuals, Partha Mitter has said:

> To art historians the knowledge that there existed in India a style of art which owed its origin to the classical tradition proved immensely valuable. Since it was never in doubt that classical art was the epitome of perfection, the art of Gandhāra produced under that influence had of necessity to be superior to the rest of Indian art
>
> (Mitter 1977: 258).

In his "Beginnings of Buddhist Art" Foucher asserts that "(the aniconic) evolution was brusquely interrupted by a veritable artistic cataclysm [...] (in which the)

Plate 2.8 Right: Image of Buddha. 'Mathura' style. From
Ahicchatra. Dated in the year 32, possibly Kaniska Era. Ca.
mid-second century. National Museum New Delhi.

Hellenised sculptors of the northwest […] [created] the Indo-Greek type of
Buddha. Immediately their colleagues of the low country [India], [were] seduced
by this wonderful innovation […] [that] rupture[d] […] the magic charm which
had weighed so heavily and so long upon the ancient Buddhist school" (Foucher
1917: 24). Although the stylistic features Foucher extolled, in fact turned out to
be Roman, not Greek, as seen in a typical example (Plate 2.8, left), the heavy
folds of the drapery, the strong facial features, and the musculature of the torso
became hallmarks of the argument for a Western origin of the Buddha image.

Calling the Hellenistic introduction of the Buddha image a "downright
coup d'etat" (Marshall & Foucher 1940 I: 193), Foucher believed that the Greek
influenced Buddha images were better Buddhist sculptures than anything the
earlier Indian artists had created.

Ultimately, Foucher's measuring rod of expectations led him and his followers to overlook the intrinsic message of the art. This problem—the misunderstanding of the thematic content of the art—is inextricably related to and has been perpetuated by the terminology that has been used to describe this artistic phenomenon. Using a term—aniconism—that defines something according to what it is not, scholars have been overly concerned with what they believe *should* be in the art rather than with what is actually there. Believing that the scenes shown on the monuments were meant to illustrate episodes in the life of the Buddha, Foucher naturally found the absence of the Buddha figure perplexing. Inferring that the objects in the reliefs—such as trees, *stūpas*, and wheels—were intended as symbols for something that was not shown, namely, an anthropomorphic representation of the Buddha, Foucher was led astray from the intended meaning of the art.

Response to Foucher came from Coomaraswamy, who has rightly been considered one of the major modern figures writing on the history and meaning of Indian art (Plate 2.7, right). Son of a noble Sri Lankan father and a wealthy English mother, Coomaraswamy was engaged with both Eastern and Western thinking, a duality that is reflected in many of his writings.

Although Coomaraswamy himself represented a hybrid of Asian and European cultures, many of his publications were, at least on one level, aimed at idealising and defending the indigenous traditions of India. Born at a time when India was attempting to throw off the yoke of centuries of British rule, Coomaraswamy recognised the European imperialist thinking of Foucher. Responding with his own Indian nationalistic view of the aniconic problem, Coomaraswamy proposed that the first Buddha image had in fact been created in India as a result of indigenous developments, not Hellenic influence. To support his view, Coomaraswamy cited examples of Buddha images from the so-called Mathura school in northern India, with their characteristically Indian features, such as the fleshy body; transparent, clingy drapery; and distinctive hair style (Plate 2.8, right).

In a seminal article published in the *Art Bulletin* in 1927, Coomaraswamy critiqued Foucher's opinion that the idea of making Buddha images had come from Western sources, saying:

At once it was taken for granted that the idea of making such images had been suggested to the Indian mind from this outside source, and that Greek or at any rate Eurasian craftsmen had created the first images of the Buddha for Indian patrons on the foundation of a Hellenistic Apollo; and that the later images were not so much Indian as Indianised versions

of the Hellenistic, or, as it was more loosely expressed, Greek prototypes. This view was put forward, as M. Foucher himself admits, in a manner best calculated to flatter the prejudices of European students and to offend the susceptibilities of Indians […]

(Coomaraswamy 1927: 287).

Coomaraswamy continues:

From the standpoint of orthodox European scholarship the question was regarded as settled, and all that remained was to work out the details […] When, a little later, doubts were expressed from various quarters external to the circle of orthodox scholarship, doubts suggested rather by stylistic and *a priori* psychological considerations, than by purely archaeological evidence, M. Foucher, the author most committed to the Greek theory, did not hesitate to suggest in his genial way that in the case of European students, these doubts were only the result of aesthetic prejudice, in the case of Indian students, of nationalist rancour

(Coomaraswamy 1927: 287–288).

Observing that the privileging of the Greek also led to early misunderstandings of early Christian art as representing "nothing more than classical art in decadence" (Coomaraswamy 1927: 288), Coomaraswamy claims that some Western authors have displayed such an 'obsession' with the idea of Indo-Greek art that they have even claimed that "Greek art […] may [even] have animated the ancient art of the Aztecs and Incas of America" (Coomaraswamy 1927: 288 note 2).

By responding only to what I have called Foucher's third assumption—the idea of Western superiority—but not questioning the first two premises—that is, that the subject matter of the art was the life of the Buddha and that it was abnormal not to show the Buddha—Coomaraswamy helped channel the issue of aniconism into a contest between East and West, fought on the basis of who could claim the earlier origination of the Buddha image. Once the battle lines were drawn, attention was diverted from Foucher's other premises, as well as the internal weaknesses, contradictions, and anomalies of the aniconic theory itself.

These excerpts from the writings of Foucher and Coomaraswamy strongly suggest that the development and passionate advocacy of the aniconic theory involved an array of political, social, and cultural factors that were external to the issue itself. Indeed, I propose that the theory of aniconism might not have achieved its sanctified place in art historical writings if the related issue of

where the first Buddha image was made had not been so hotly debated. So intent were the two camps on claiming what they felt was their respective culture's rightful contribution to Buddhist art that perhaps the most important issue was overlooked. Indeed, throughout the debate, the more fundamental question was never posed: was there ever really an aniconic period?

The attractiveness of a proposed duality—a tension between image and non-image—was likely deeply embedded in the European consciousness of Foucher's day. Indeed, the admonition against creating graven images of god is one of the ten most important rules of the Abrahamic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Placed second on the list of ten commandments— four spaces ahead of thou shalt not kill—the centrality of this precept to the Abrahamic religions is undisputed. European scholars like Foucher, steeped in the Abrahamic tradition, must have at least on a subconscious level foregrounded the idea of a prohibition in their examination of early Buddhist art. Puzzled by what appeared to be an avoidance of creating Buddha images, Foucher and others must have extrapolated that—like Moses who prohibited his followers from making graven idols and worshiping them—the early Buddhists had similarly objected to figurative depictions of their greatest teacher.

CHANGING PARADIGMS

Considering how entrenched the old theory is, it is not surprising that as I began to present my 'an-aniconic' theory in publications and lectures, my findings were met with scepticism and disbelief. Such emotional reaction is precisely what is to be expected, if one agrees with the noted MIT philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn, whose highly influential book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* offers great insight into how scientific progress is accomplished. Essentially Kuhn contends that scientific change is not brought about by incremental additions to a linear stream of knowledge, but rather through shifts in paradigms. Applying his concept to all scholarly endeavour, not merely the sciences, it may be suggested that knowledge does not always occur in a heuristic, incremental way.

John Casti, another scientific writer, explains that:

According to Kuhn's thesis, scientists […] carry out their day to day affairs within a framework of presuppositions about what constitutes a problem, a solution, and a method. Such a background of shared assumptions makes up a paradigm, and at any given time a particular scientific community will have a prevailing paradigm that shapes and directs work in the field. Since people become so attached to their

> paradigms, Kuhn claims that scientific revolutions involve bloodshed
> […] (because) the underlying issues are not rational but emotional […]
> (Casti 1989: 40).

In the same way, I suggest that the aniconic paradigm must be abandoned, and a new way of looking at the materials must be sought. To move forward, we need not only to reassess the evidence from the art itself but understand and dismantle the underlying paradigm. The repercussions in the fields of art history, Buddhological studies, and other related areas promise to be enormous and the way may be opened to new insights that would be impossible if the old assumptions are retained.

In sum, the conference description notes that "The confrontation with the 'other' has been particularly pronounced during periods of colonisation throughout Asia" and asks "how was world art […] interpreted in the West and how were categories such as 'masterpiece' or 'golden age' employed to classify and judge art" (Hegewald 2011)? Clearly, Foucher and his followers did not see the early Buddhist art as masterpieces, nor did they view the period of their creation as a golden age. Through our modern lens, however, perhaps we can help right this wrong.

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[6] The abbreviations 'l.' and 'r.' refer to left and right illustration respectively.

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