

Pakistan – Terre de rencontre – L’art du Gandhara

By David Waterman

Pakistan – Terre de rencontre (Ier-VIe siècles): Les arts du Gandhara. Musée Guimet, musée national des arts asiatiques, 6 place d’Iéna, 75116 Paris. www.guimet.fr



The exposition runs from 21 April to 16 August, 2010, in collaboration with the National Art and Exposition Center of the Federal Republic of Germany, Bonn: www.bundeskunsthalle.de and the government of Pakistan. *Pakistan – Terre de rencontre* is a modified version of Prof. Michel Jansen’s and Dr. Christian Luczanits’s earlier conception, entitled “Gandhara. The Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan. Legends, monasteries, and Paradise,” which was earlier displayed in Bonn, Berlin and Zurich.

This magnificent exhibition brings together over two hundred works of art, sculpture for the most part, on loan principally from the museums of Lahore, Peshawar and Swat, although some pieces come from further afield, notably Taxila and Karachi. The central theme is, as the title in English makes clear, the Buddhist Heritage of Pakistan, although the French title chooses the larger historical background of *rencontre*, or meeting / exchange of cultures. Those who have read Nadeem Aslam's 2008 novel will immediately recognize Gandhara as the region of northwest Pakistan and neighboring Afghanistan where *The Wasted Vigil* is set, a detail which the organizers have not overlooked – the French translation of the novel is on sale in the gift shop. We learn, from both the Guimet exhibit and *The Wasted Vigil*, that Gandhara is where the Buddha was first represented with a human face, although given the multiple influences in the region, it is perhaps more appropriate to insist on the plural: human faces.

Historians have called the art of Gandhara “the child of an Athenian sculptor and a Buddhist mother” (*Le Guide Pratique* 2), a largely forgotten child rediscovered at the end of the nineteenth century with the recognition of the multiple influences on the art of the region: Indian, of course, and Greek (including the intervention of no less than Alexander the Great), never forgetting Persian, Scythian, and Parthian influence and later conquests by the Huns, Genghis Khan, and the Mughal empire (*Le Guide Pratique* 3). Under Kanishka, the most illustrious of the Kouchan emperors, around 120 BC, mutual tolerance was the rule, with the result that, for several centuries afterwards, “Buddha and Zarathustra cohabit temples and monasteries of Greek design” – even the coins of the realm reveal the diversity of cultural pressures, depending on which side of the coin one examines (*Le Guide Pratique* 3). The representations of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas are no less diverse, what Pierre Cambon calls “naturalism which makes reference to the world [...] a Hellenic Orient,” where a typically Indian Buddha may be dressed in Greek or Persian fashion, or even more striking, where Siddharta fasting is the skeletal image of a starving man, retaining none of the Buddha's characteristic ample flesh (*Connaissance des arts* 7). The Guimet exhibit provides a wonderful opportunity to see firsthand the life of Buddha in all its diversity, and to become acquainted with the multiple faces of the Buddha(s) from Gandhara.

Even as the current exhibition draws to a close, the Guimet's permanent collection offers a very complete sampling of the art of Gandhara, thanks primarily to the archaeological missions of Alfred Foucher (1895-97), Louis Barthoux (1923) and Paul Pelliot (1906-08; see *Connaissance des Arts* page 7). And a final note: At the moment, the contemporary Pakistani artist Rashid Rana is displaying about twenty of his photomontage works under the title “Perpetual Paradox,” here and there surprising visitors to the permanent collection with an interesting and





provocative juxtaposition of styles; Rana's interrogation of the role of images as the building blocks of how people think, and ultimately create reality, makes his œuvre an example of political art at its finest. The website warns, "This exhibition contains images that may offend sensitive viewers," but not to worry. There is nothing offensive in Rana's "Perpetual Paradox," although viewers may be troubled by the realization that we are all part of the big picture, hence each of us shares a bit of the responsibility for such dislocations, illusions and paradoxes.

Special thanks are due to the exhibition's Commissaire, Mr. Pierre Cambon, as well as to Ms. Hélène Lefèvre, Director of Communication, for their assistance and kind permission to reproduce the accompanying images, not to mention the helpful staff of the museum who went out of their way to answer numerous questions during my visit on 17 July 2010.

Works Consulted:

Aslam, Nadeem. *The Wasted Vigil*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.

Connaissance des arts. Les arts du Gandhara. Pakistan – Terre de rencontre (Ier-VIe siècles). Paris: Société Française de Promotion Artistique, 2009. ISSN: 1242-9198.

Gandhara, ou le visage de Bouddha. Le Guide Pratique de l'Exposition. Paris: Paris Match. No other publication data given.

<http://www.guimet.fr/Pakistan-Terre-de-rencontre-Ier> Accessed 3 July 2010.

<http://www.guimet.fr/Rashid-Rana-Perpetual-Paradoxe> Accessed 21 July 2010.