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Gandhara vs Mathura Schools of Art

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Gandhara vs Mathura Schools of Art

Gandhara and Mathura were the two early schools that first carved the Buddha as a man. Gandhara used grey schist and Greek-style faces. Mathura used red sandstone and Indian forms. A school of art is a group of workshops that share one style.

Gandharanorth-west South Asia. Sculptors used grey schist or white stucco and Greek-inspired faces.

Mathuranear north-central India. Sculptors used mottled red sandstone from Sikri.

Patronsboth schools grew in the Kushan period, about 100 BCE to 250 CE.

The debate Foucher saw Greek roots for the Buddha image. Coomaraswamy argued for Indian roots.

What should I know first about the two schools?

1 What are the Gandhara and Mathura schools of art?

They are the two places where the Buddha was first shown as a man. Before this, artists used symbols. After this, devotees could see his face and body in stone.

The earliest sculptures showing the Buddha as a man came out of two places: Gandhara and Mathura.

Why do we study them as a pair?

The two schools worked at the same time but chose different looks. Gandhara leaned on Greek and Roman ideas. Mathura leaned on older Indian ways of carving the body.

First Buddha images

Gandhara: grey schist

Mathura: red sandstone

Illustration: The two places named by ORIAS.

Sources: orias.berkeley.edu; archive.org

2 Where and when did each school grow?

Gandhara lay in the north-west, in parts of present-day Pakistan, India and Afghanistan. Mathura was a city near north-central India. Both flourished in the Kushan period. That period ran from about 100 BCE to 250 CE.

Why was Gandhara open to Greek ideas?

Indo-Greek kings ruled Gandhara from the fourth century BCE onward. The region became a gateway between India and the West. Alexander’s conquest also brought Greek influence there.

What made Mathura different?

Mathura artists drew on indigenous Indian styles. They also loved the living body. Their stone came from quarries at nearby Sikri.

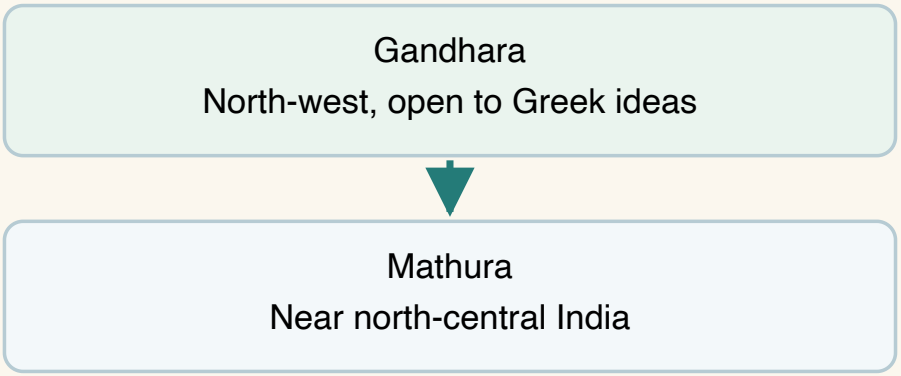


Illustration: Places as set out in this card.

Sources: harvardartmuseums.org; orias.berkeley.edu

3 What did Gandhara sculpture look like?

Gandhara artists took cues from Greek sculpture. They carved classical faces, thick curly locks and heavy drapery.

What stone did they use?

Gandhara artists used grey schist or white stucco. Schist is a layered grey rock that splits and carves finely. Stucco is a lime plaster that artists mould by hand.

A standing Gandhara Buddha in a heavy toga-like robe, 150 to 200 CE

A standing Buddha from Gandhara, 150 to 200 CE. Note the wavy hair and heavy robe. Photo (accession 1972.43): Cleveland Museum of Art, via clevelandart.org (licence: CC0). Resized from the original.

What do Cleveland's notes add?

The Cleveland Museum of Art describes a standing Buddha from Gandhara, made in 150 to 200 CE. It has a placid face and thick wavy hair. His robe is heavy and toga-like.

Cleveland says these artists combined Mediterranean and South Asian ideas. They were among the first to show the Buddha this way.

> **Quick check 1.** Gandhara sculptors mainly used grey schist or stucco. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: harvardartmuseums.org; clevelandart.org

4 What did Mathura sculpture look like?

Mathura Buddha bodies were shown with a sense of physical presence. Their robes were thin enough to reveal the body underneath.

What stone did they use?

Mathura images were carved in mottled red sandstone. This reddish stone came from nearby quarries.


A seated Mathura Buddha under the Bodhi tree with a solar disk halo, about 120 CE

A seated Buddha from Mathura, about 120 CE, with a solar-disk halo. Photo (accession 1970.63): Cleveland Museum of Art, via clevelandart.org (licence: CC0). Resized from the original.

What does a Mathura Buddha include?

Cleveland describes a seated Buddha from Mathura, made about 120 CE. He sits under the Bodhi tree. His hair is coiled in a topknot. A solar disk, like a halo, glows behind his head.

Lions on the throne show the teaching spreading in all four directions.

Quick check 2. Mathura sculptors carved mainly in red sandstone. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: harvardartmuseums.org; orias.berkeley.edu; clevelandart.org

How do the two schools differ and where did they come from?

5 How do the two schools differ at a glance?

The table puts the main differences in one place. Each row comes from a museum or a scholar named in the sources.

Point	Gandhara	Mathura
Place	North-west, now Pakistan and nearby	Near north-central India
Stone	Grey schist or white stucco	Mottled red sandstone
Style roots	Greek and Roman, with Indian and Parthian	Older Indian styles
Body and robe	Heavy drapery, classical face	Thin robe, strong body
Story mode	Frozen moment with depth	Shorthand narrative

What does “shorthand” mean here?

Partha Mitter, an art historian, says Gandhara used the frozen moment of Western art. It relied on accurate bodies and depth. Mathura used a shorthand way to tell the Buddha’s life.

Stone
Grey schist or stucco	Red sandstone
Roots
Greek-inspired	Indian
Robe
Heavy drapery	Thin robe

Illustration: Left side is Gandhara, right side is Mathura.

Sources: harvardartmuseums.org; orias.berkeley.edu

6 How was the Buddha shown before these images?

Early artists did not carve his body. They used signs instead. Alfred Foucher, a French scholar, listed an empty throne, a wheel and a mound as such symbols.

What did the wheel mean?

The wheel, or dharma-chakra, stood for the First Sermon at Benares.

Why did this change?

Foucher says the valley of the Ganges welcomed the Indo-Greek type of Buddha. He sees it installed from Mathura to Bodh Gaya.

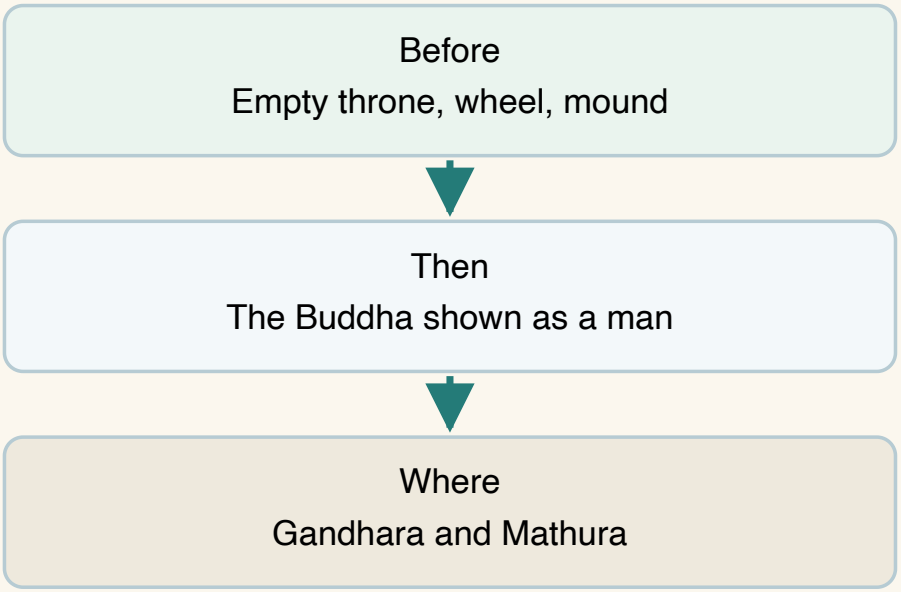


Illustration: Sequence from Foucher and ORIAS.

> **Quick check 3.** The wheel in early Buddhist art stood for the Buddha's birth. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: archive.org; jstor.org

7 Who paid for this art?

The Kushan kings were the patrons. The Kushan kings took control of Gandhara as Buddhism emerged there as a major force.

Which ruler is named?

The study names Kadphises I, dated about 40 to 78 CE. He notes that some scholars take the seated figure on this king's coins for a Buddha. He also places Kanishka's capitals at Peshawar and Kapisa.

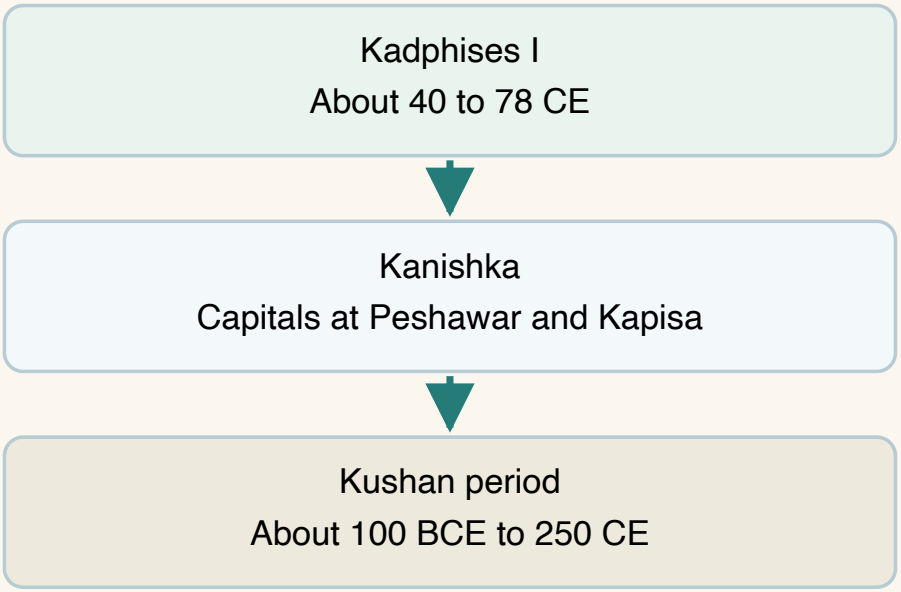


Illustration: Dates from Coomaraswamy and Harvard.

What did Kushan sculptors set down?

Kushan sculptors fixed clear rules for the Buddha, the Bodhisattva and their hand gestures. These gestures are called mudras.

> **Quick check 4.** Kushan sculptors set clear rules for the Buddha image and its mudras. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: orias.berkeley.edu; jstor.org

Who made the first Buddha image, and what happened next?

8 Who made the first Buddha image: Greeks or Indians?

Scholars disagreed. Foucher argued for a Greek-inspired origin in the north-west. Coomaraswamy argued for an Indian origin. This split is the heart of the Gandhara and Mathura story.

What did Foucher say?

Foucher called the Mathura and Amaravati images “as like as brothers”. He said both came from a common ancestor of blue slate in the north-west. He said Mathura and Amaravati gave older Buddha images than Sarnath, going back to the second century CE.

What did Coomaraswamy say?

Coomaraswamy argued for the Indian origin of the Buddha image. He did not deny foreign elements. He said they should be studied after the home growth is understood.

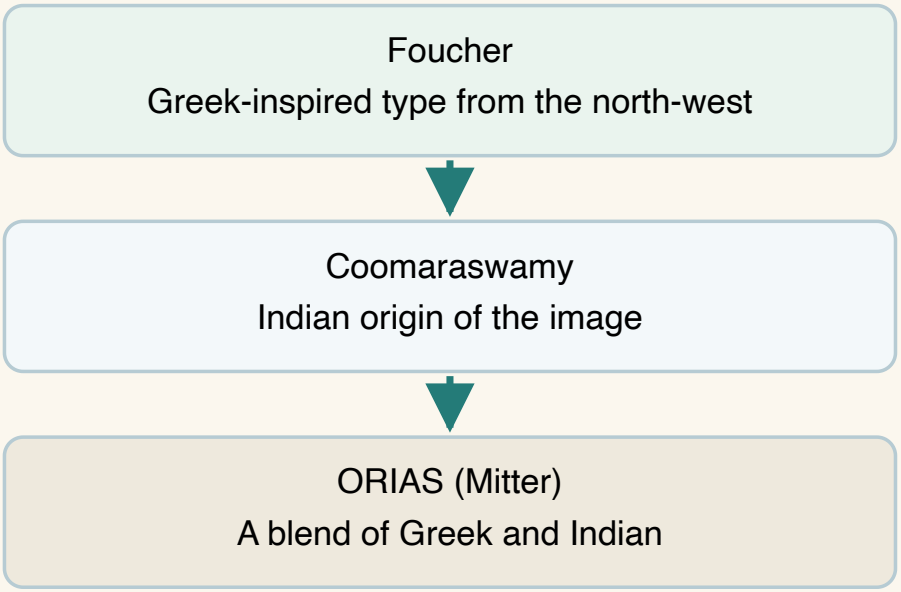


Illustration: Views as set out in this card.

Where does that leave us?

A blended view is common today. Gandhara looks Greek-inspired and Mathura looks indigenous. Gandhara made only selective use of Western styles. It melded Hellenistic, Roman, Indian and Parthian elements.

Sources: archive.org; jstor.org; orias.berkeley.edu

9 How far did Mathura's influence travel?

Far beyond its own city. Mathura was so famous under Kanishka that Buddha and Bodhisattva images went to Sanchi, Prayag, Sarnath, Bodh Gaya and even Taxila.

Did it shape later art?

Yes. He says Mathura types formed the base of Gupta art. They also shaped the images at Amaravati.

Did Mathura borrow Greek drapery too?

Cleveland says Mathura artists reworked the Greco-Roman drapery known in Gandhara. They made the folds more abstract. The result gave the Buddha a superhuman energy.


A seated Mathura Buddha with abstracted drapery folds, 200s CE

A seated Buddha from Mathura, 200s CE, with abstracted drapery folds. Photo (accession 1941.94): Cleveland Museum of Art, via clevelandart.org (licence: CC0). Resized from the original.

> **Quick check 5.** Mathura images were sent as far as Sanchi and Taxila. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: jstor.org; clevelandart.org

10 What happened to Gandhara art later?

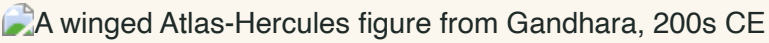
It grew more Indian and changed material. In the third and fourth centuries, the school kept flourishing. Stone was largely replaced by terracotta and stucco. The type became thoroughly Indianized.

How did the school end?

He attributes the end to the Huna invasions at the close of the fifth century.

Did Greek ideas still show?

Yes. Cleveland holds a Gandhara figure of Atlas given wings, so he looks superhuman. It is dated to the 200s CE. It shows how Mediterranean figures entered Buddhist art.



A winged Atlas-Hercules figure from Gandhara, 200s CE. Photo (accession 2011.136): Cleveland Museum of Art, via clevelandart.org (licence: CC0). Resized from the original.

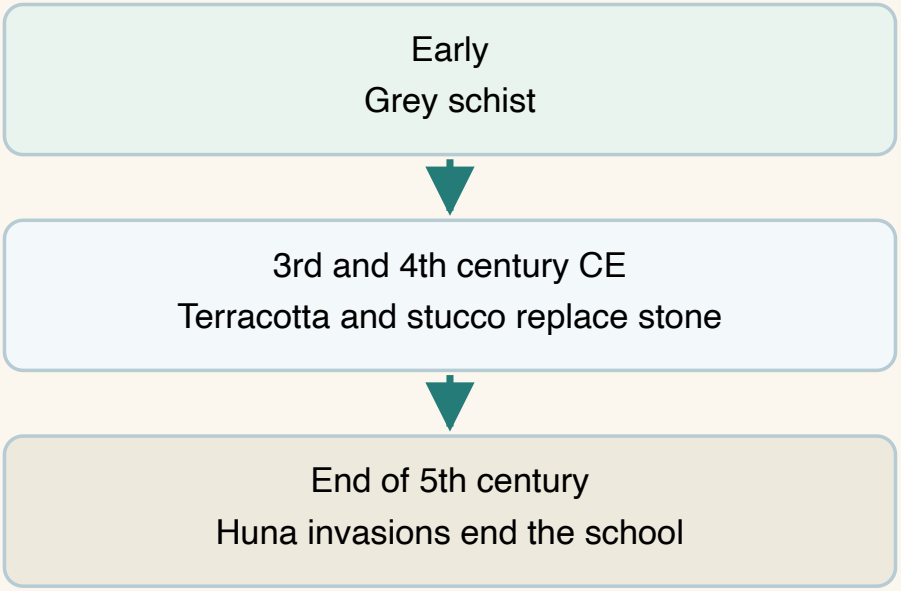


Illustration: Facts from Coomaraswamy.

> **Quick check 6.** Gandhara art stayed entirely in stone to the very end. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: jstor.org; clevelandart.org

How do I revise the two schools in one minute?

11 What should I remember about the two schools?

What are the key points?

- **Two cradles.** The Buddha first appears as a man in Gandhara and Mathura.

- **Gandhara.** Grey schist or stucco, Greek-inspired face, heavy drapery.
- **Mathura.** Red sandstone from Sikri, Indian body, thin robe.
- **Patrons.** Kushan kings.
- **Symbols first.** An empty throne and a wheel came before the image.
- **The debate.** Foucher argued for Greek roots. Coomaraswamy argued for Indian roots.
- **Later Gandhara.** Stone gave way to stucco and the style became Indianized.

Sources: harvardartmuseums.org; orias.berkeley.edu; jstor.org

Which slips cost marks on the two schools?

Exam practice

12 What do examiners test about the two schools?

What are the traps?

1. **Do not swap the stones.** Gandhara is schist or stucco. Mathura is red sandstone.
2. **Do not swap the style roots.** Gandhara is Greek-inspired. Mathura is Indian.
3. **Know the gesture.** The CAPF key gives abhaya for the raised hand.
4. **Stucco replaced stone late.** The CDS question says “completely”; the scholarly account says “largely”. The key still gives the third century CE.

Has this come up in the exam?

The answer is (c). In the third and fourth centuries stone was largely replaced by terracotta and stucco. The exam key gives the third century CE.

The answer is (b). The right hand of standing Buddha images is generally raised in abhaya mudra. A mudra is a hand gesture, and abhaya means a gesture of fearlessness.

Sources: jstor.org; mcqquestion.com

Review your 6 understanding checks

Review the feedback after each answer. The understanding-check score lasts for this page session.

Reset the checks when you want another attempt. This score is separate from the practice score below.

Questions to think through

Why did two schools carve the Buddha in different stones?

The two schools used different stone. Gandhara used grey schist or stucco. Mathura used red sandstone. Museum and university sources both record this split.

Why does Gandhara look Greek?

Indo-Greek kings ruled the region from the fourth century BCE. Alexander's conquest also brought Greek influence. The region was a gateway between India and the West.

Does a Greek look prove the first image was Greek?

Not on its own. Coomaraswamy argued that Indian roots must be understood first. Gandhara used Western styles only in part.

What did Mathura send to other cities?

Buddha and Bodhisattva images went from Mathura to Sanchi, Prayag, Sarnath, Bodh Gaya and Taxila. This shows how respected its workshops were.

Sources: harvardartmuseums.org; orias.berkeley.edu; jstor.org

Practice MCQs

1. Which material did Gandhara sculptors mainly use, versus Mathura sculptors?

A. Red sandstone versus black basalt

B. Bronze versus grey schist

C. Marble versus terracotta

D. Grey schist versus red sandstone

See answer ↓

2. The Gandhara school of ancient Indian art, renowned for its distinctive fusion of Indian Buddhist subject matter with Hellenistic Greek artistic style and technique, developed significantly during the rule of which dynasty?

A. The Guptas

B. The Mauryas

C. The Kushanas

D. The Satavahanas

See answer ↓

3. The Mathura school of ancient Indian sculpture, which produced artistic work for Buddhist, Jain and Brahmanical religious traditions alike, characteristically used which type of stone?

A. Green schist

B. Red sandstone

C. White marble

D. Black granite

See answer ↓

4. The Gandhara School of art is the synthesis of

A. Indian and Chinese Art

B. Indian and Greek Art

C. Indian and Persian Art

D. Indian and Turk-Afghan Art

See answer ↓

5. Who among the following was the ruler of Kushan dynasty?

A. Vikramaditya

B. Danti Durga

C. Khadphises I

D. Pushyamitra

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.** The correct answer is **Grey schist versus red sandstone**. Gandhara artists used grey schist or white stucco. Mathura images were typically carved in mottled red sandstone from Sikri. Marble versus terracotta is wrong because these are not the stones of the two schools. Bronze versus grey schist is wrong because Gandhara's stone was schist, not bronze. Red sandstone versus black basalt is wrong because it swaps the schools and names a stone neither source mentions. Memory hook: Gandhara is grey, Mathura is red. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** The correct answer is **The Kushanas**. The Kushan kings took control of Gandhara, and Buddhism emerged there as a major force. The Gandharan Kushan period ran from about 100 BCE to 250 CE. Gandhara also took its cues from Greek sculpture. The Mauryas are wrong because the Gandhara school did not belong to their time. The Guptas are wrong because the Gandharan Kushan period ran from about 100 BCE to 250 CE, which is before the Gupta age. The Satavahanas are wrong because neither source links them to Gandhara. The claim that the other three dynasties are not Gandhara patrons rests on the sources not naming them. Memory hook: Kushans, Gandhara, Greek style. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** The correct answer is **Red sandstone**. Mathura images were typically sculpted in mottled red sandstone from nearby Sikri. White marble and black granite are wrong because they are not the stones of Mathura. Green schist is wrong because Gandhara, not Mathura, used schist, and it was grey. Memory hook: Mathura means red sandstone. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** The correct answer is **Indian and Greek Art**. Gandhara took its cues from Greek sculpture, with classical faces, curly locks and heavy drapery. Mathura drew on indigenous Indian styles. Gandhara also melded Hellenistic, Roman, Indian and Parthian elements. Indian and Persian art is wrong because Parthian is one of four elements, and the key's pair is Indian and Greek. Indian and Chinese art is wrong because Chinese art is not part of Gandhara. Indian and Turk-Afghan art is wrong because the school is not described this way. Memory hook: Gandhara equals Indian plus Greek. ↑ Q4

5. **C.** The correct answer is **Khadphises I**. Kadphises I is dated about 40 to 78 CE in studies of coins and the Kushan kings. The Gandhara and Mathura schools belong to the Kushan period. Khadphises I belongs to the Kushan line; that step is general knowledge, not in the opened sources. Vikramaditya, Danti Durga and Pushyamitra are wrong because none of the sources opened for this lesson names them as Kushan rulers. That statement about the other three is general knowledge, not a sourced claim. Memory hook: Kadphises and Kanishka are Kushan names. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** Gandhara artists used grey schist or white stucco. Schist is a layered grey rock. ↑ 1
2. **True.** Mathura images were carved in mottled red sandstone from Sikri. This stone looks reddish. ↑ 2
3. **False.** The dharma-cakra, or wheel, symbolised the First Sermon at Benares. Early artists used it before the Buddha was shown as a man. ↑ 3
4. **True.** Kushan sculptors established clear iconographic conventions for the Buddha, the Bodhisattva and their mudras. ↑ 4
5. **True.** He says images from Mathura went to Sanchi, Prayag, Sarnath, Bodh Gaya, Rajagriha and even Taxila in Kanishka's time. ↑ 5
6. **False.** In the third and fourth centuries stone was largely replaced by terracotta and stucco. The type became thoroughly Indianized. ↑ 6

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