



Unknown (Islamic Republic of Pakistan)  
*Head of Buddha*, 2nd—3rd century CE  
gray schist  
8 3/4 in.  
Museum purchase, Wachenheim Family Fund  
M.2006.13

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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*Head of Buddha*, 2nd—3rd century CE

The ancient kingdom of Gandhara stretched across parts of present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan along the Silk Road trade route where Buddhist civilization thrived. Although earlier Buddhist art obliquely depicted the Buddha through non-figurative symbols or footprints marking his presence, Gandharan artists preferred to portray the Buddha as a human. Also influenced by Greek and Roman sculptural styles, Gandharan artists carved and painted the Buddha with serene features highlighted with realistic details. The Buddha's hair is short, curled, and knotted at the top. These and other stylistic conventions spread throughout Asia and are found in depictions of the Buddha to this day.

Source:

"The Lost World of Buddhist Gandhara: An Ancient Buddhist Kingdom of the Middle East." Barbara O'Brien.



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## DISCUSS

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Although earlier Buddhist art depicted the Buddha indirectly through symbols or footprints marking his presence, Gandharan artists preferred to portray the Buddha as a human figure.

Take a close look at the *Head of Buddha*.

- What details do you notice?
- What types of textures do you see?
- What shapes or patterns do you notice?
- What types of lines can you find? How would you describe them?
- How would you describe the Buddha's expression?
- What do these physical characteristics convey about the Buddha? What qualities might worshippers emulate?

Details of the Buddha's appearance help to tell his story and set him apart from ordinary people. Can you find these attributes in the sculpture?

- His elongated earlobes point to the weighty earrings he would have worn during his early life as a prince. He renounced his wealth and royal stature to pursue enlightenment.
- His face was said to be composed of convex (outward curving) forms.
- His eyebrows showed benevolence and compassion.
- His skin was so delicate that no dust could adhere to it.
- The *urna*, a mark between his eyebrows, represents wisdom and augmented vision.
- The *usnisa*, the raised area on top of his head, signifies his infinite intelligence.



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## CREATE

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Artists traditionally portray the Buddha in particular poses. After taking a close look at the way this sculpture presents the Buddha, think about how you would have sculpted the rest of him. Now sketch out your ideas. Consider the ways that different poses, gestures, clothing, props, and compositions can express ideas, feelings, or characteristics of the Buddha.

Follow these links to learn more about traditional ways of representing the Buddha:

- *Mudras* - symbolic hand gestures  
[www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/mudras.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/mudras.htm)
- Lotus - a flower and symbol of purity and blossoming spiritual life  
[www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/b\\_lotus.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/b_lotus.htm)
- Eight Auspicious Symbols  
[www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/b8symbol.htm](http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/b8symbol.htm)
- Poses  
In addition to standing, the Buddha is often shown in one of these common poses. There are many variations of these postures.  
[www.east-asian-history.net/textbooks/480/graphics/ch9/01.jpg](http://www.east-asian-history.net/textbooks/480/graphics/ch9/01.jpg)

After making your own sketch, see how some other artists have portrayed the Buddha:

[www.metmuseum.org/toah/hi/hi\\_rebs.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hi/hi_rebs.htm)

Compare your sketch with your research. How do they relate? What are the similarities? Differences? What techniques have these artists used to make the most of the three-dimensional format of sculpture? Try making a 3D version of your idea using clay.