

Syncretism and Style: The Art of the Gandhara

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Abstract

The notion of syncretism in visual style is fleshed out, with special allusion to India's Gandhara school, and to other works with Asian and South Asian provenance. Rowland, McMahon, and Muller-Ebeling are cited, and it is concluded that the Gandhara school offers work much less exemplary of the notion of syncretism than is commonly thought.

Attention has recently been drawn to the art of the Gandhara school in Northern Central Asia because of the destruction of some prominent pieces of work representative of the style by the Taliban. Although art historians have long appreciated the art of India and its environs, many Westerners fail to learn how to distinguish among various schools, and the region as a whole is often unknown or misunderstood, even by those more sophisticated in their art historical training.¹

The Gandhara school is significantly different, in provenance and in style, from most of what a Westerner is likely to see in a museum, or even on the subcontinent, insofar as the label "India" is involved. This work flourished from roughly the first to fifth century A.D., in what is today Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Punjab region of India itself. It is a style derived from the presence in that region at that time of a number of soldiers, scholars and prominent individuals from the Roman empire, and it represents an unusual attempt at merger and syncretism of various sorts of styles. Prominent among pieces from this school are various portrayals of the Buddha, most of which do not resemble any other portrayals likely to be seen. At first glance, they may strike the viewer as belonging more to the Hellenistic schools with which they are sometimes associated, and they certainly bear the hallmarks of Greco-Roman stylization. Rowland himself notes that "There never was any real fusion of Indian and Western ideals in Gandhara."² It will be the purpose of this paper to examine the concept of syncretism, especially as applied to the art of this region. What is the meaning of this term? If we see two styles failing to meld—if the object strikes the viewer as not an amalgam, but an attempt at overlay—has syncretism been achieved? These and similar conceptual questions are the results of study of the art of the Gandhara school.

I

Rowland feels that he is able to make the claim that there was no genuine “fusion” in the Gandhara style because, in brief, much of the sculpture can best be described as Indian (typically, Buddhist) subjects conveyed in a Greco-Roman manner. That the Buddha figures, in particular, are strikingly at variance with, for example, the Buddhas of the later classical Gupta period, cannot be denied. And yet it would not be accurate to say that a given Gandhara Buddha is simply a Roman icon in the pose of the Buddha. What is most striking about the Gandhara work is that styles may be pointed out as at work, all at once, and yet quite independently of each other.

For instance, the “Seated Buddha from Takht-I-Bahi,” plate 34 in Rowland, is described as having an “Apollonian facial type,” and “deeply –pleated drapery reminiscent of Roman workmanship.”³ Rowland goes on to say that this figure is essentially a “draped Greco-Roman adolescent in an unusual pose.”⁴ This description, if we can go along with the author’s terminology, certainly buttresses his overall contention that the Gandhara school represents a comparative lack of fusion. And, indeed, study of the figure in question reveals that we recognize the figure as an attempt at the Buddha largely because of the pose of the figure (seated, with a type of a typical mudra, or gesture). Not only the relatively pronounced folds of the drapery, but the rendering of the nose and all the facial features are in the style of Western art.

A counterargument could be constructed, however, and it is at this point that we have to contend with the meaning of a term such as “syncretism”, at least insofar as the visual arts are concerned. If such a notion is to have any content, it must be related to two conceptual issues: (1) the first is that there must be at least two or more discernible styles under consideration [else, obviously, the question does not arise]; (2) the second is that it must be at least minimally possible to pick these styles out of the “fused” art, or otherwise one would not be able to say that something incorporating both styles had occurred. When examined, closely, the notion of an artistic fusion of styles, or of a syncretism, has an air of paradox about it. There is a very fine line between being able to discern the existence of the two (or more) styles, and the plain appearance of two styles incongruously juxtaposed together in a way that does not admit of fusion.

Clearly, Rowland wants to claim that the latter sort of phenomenon is what is occurring in the Gandhara school. The counterposing question is thus: what would a genuine “fusion” of two such disparate styles look like? How would the observer be able to tell that there were indeed two styles, unless they are so marked—as Rowland claims—that there “never was any real fusion.”⁵

Interestingly enough, the conceptual apparatus to help us out here may be available from a perusal of work done in a contemporary time period. We are now, in the latter part of the twentieth century and the early part of the twenty-first century, much more comfortable with addressing what are usually termed postmodernist styles. In a piece on postmodern architecture, David Goldblatt has written:

Pluralism” can mean (1) eclecticism, i.e., the incorporation of elements of various styles into a single architectural project; or it may mean

simply (2) juxtaposition of two—perhaps a few—architectural styles, coexisting side by side or in relative proximity, but each clearly and distinctly independent.⁶

Because of the similarity of modes of presentation, the claims that Goldblatt makes for architecture would appear to be directly translatable to sculpture, or even relief. The question is: is the hypothesized fusion desired by Rowland closer to the first alternative, or the second?

II

We might be tempted to think that what Rowland has in mind as an ideal is an approximation of Goldblatt’s first take on pluralism, the incorporation of various elements. Presumably we can pick those elements out to some extent, but not to the extent that typifies the Gandhara school. It would be too naïve to say that there are no examples of genuine fusion or syncretism to be found, but it remains an intriguing fact that most of the examples cited—at least, in sculpture or relief work—tend toward one extreme or the other.

The Gandhara school leaves us, as Rowland has stated, with the uneasy sensation that one style has been grafted on to the subject matter of another. But the other extreme is something like loss of discernible style. This, too, has its obvious exemplars.

One such exemplar, noted by many commentators is the relief work style of Indonesia. Although an exhibit during the past decade or so at Washington’s National Gallery gave major focus to this work, much of the work is virtually indistinguishable from work done in India. One commentator has described the origins of the work in this way:

Beginning around the eighth century, Indonesia experienced an artistic flowering that lasted more than seven hundred years. This archipelago of more than three thousand islands, lying across ancient trade routes between India and China, was a commercial and cultural crossroads. Maritime contacts with the Asian mainland brought Hinduism and Buddhism to the islands, and soon the artistic traditions of India were known there as well. Artists in the archipelago responded creatively to these influences, which they reinterpreted according to local beliefs and aesthetic ideals. The result was a new Indonesian art that survives today primarily in works in stone and metal, materials that resist the destructive forces of Indonesia’s equatorial climate.⁷

Visually, many pieces of work from Indonesia bear a marked resemblance to work from the Chola school of South India, or to other work from the Indian states of Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Indeed, it is easy to concoct a slippery slope argument to the effect that, if one did not antecedently know where a given piece of work was from, it might not be possible, with certainty to declare that it was either Indonesian or Indian.

The point of the foregoing analysis is simply to assist us in doing the

conceptual work necessary to get a handle on some ideal of syncretism or fusion. So far, we have come to the conclusion that the Gandhara work—and here, it does seem fair to give Rowland credit for having latched onto an insight—is at one end of a spectrum. It might very well be argued that portions of the reliefs available from Indonesia are at another.

If the notion of fusion and/or syncretism is to have any meaning at all in the visual arts (and in standard terms of definition, the two are usually more or less synonymous), then, as we have indicated, there has to be enough separation, so to speak, between the styles so that it is still possible to pick out at least remnants of the styles for purposes of identification, but there has to be sufficient overlap so that, instead of winding up with a fusion, we are left with a sort of unhappy grafting. It may very well be the case that such a syncretism is far rarer than the use of the terms in many artistic endeavors would indicate. The question then becomes whether or not there is an exemplar of fusion that serves our purposes in trying to come to grips with the notion.

III

Because much of the artistic tradition of South and Central Asia is foreign to us, and because it is the result of much cross-cultural fertilization in the region, it should come as no surprise that perhaps one of the best examples of such syncretism is from still another Asian area, the Tibeto-Nepali region. The extensive travels of religious figures in this Himalayan area are documented not only by Westerners, but are themselves part and parcel of the mythology of the area.⁸ What are usually known as “Tibetan *tankas*” (or, in some variations, *thankas* or even *thangkas*) come from a wide variety of cultures and geographically demarcatable areas in the Himalayas, such as Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan, and are produced by such varying groups as the Newari, the Bhutanese, and the Tamang, a group that (like the others, to some extent) straddles the region.

Muller-Ebeling and Ratsch, in their recent large work on the artistic and shamanistic traditions of this region, note that colors, stylistic variations such as flat penciling, and typical uses of borders frequently allow the discerning eye to differentiate the various provenances of examined *tankas*, but, to the uninitiated, differences would be too small to be of much help. More importantly, all of the *tankas* are similar enough in size, scope and theme that they can certainly be placed under the rubric “*tanka*.”⁹ Muller-Ebeling and Ratsch are concerned in their work to try to dispel the notion that “Tibetan *tanka*,” as a term, is an accurate designator of geographical origin. As they point out, it is often a very inaccurate guide to the actual place or site at which a work was done, but it is, easily, an appropriate guide to the sorting of a certain type of object or artifact found in the region.

Here we have, at least in its barebones formulation, a much better paradigm for syncretism than either the art of the Gandhara or the various pieces taken from Indonesian sites that are frequently lumped together under one term. The *tankas* typically exhibit just enough variation, as has been stated, to allow an individual from the region, steeped in the local cultures, to tell the origins, but also typically display enough overlap that one is in no doubt that one is looking at the type of object usually termed a “*tanka*.”

Instead of the Buddhist theme grafted onto a Greco-Roman torso mentioned by Rowland in his characterization of the Gandhara, there is a noticeable interweaving of themes, with only minor variations.¹⁰ As we have argued here, it may not be possible to find an ideal exemplar of the concept of syncretism. But what is noticeable is that the instances that fall short of being an adequate instantiation of the concept are many in number, and not at all difficult to find. It remains to be seen how we can flesh out the notion of syncretism or fusion in such a way that we can gain some insight into its application.

IV

Part of the difficulty with the concept as it is standardly adduced may have to do with its use almost solely, in art historical contexts, in terms of style. But syncretism is a much broader notion than that—it is frequently used in religious studies, for example, to speak of such fusions as that of Christianity with the traditional West African worldviews, resulting in *santeria* or *voudun*. These paradigms may be very helpful: what is noteworthy about them is that which we have found most clarifying in the art historical usages: syncretism works as a notion when there is enough meshing of conceptual or visual apparatuses that a sort of seamlessness is evoked, at least some of the time, but where there are sufficient differences—or sufficient lines of disjointure—that some conceptual differences can be made out.

Recent work by Cliff McMahon, on the traditional art of China, is helpful in the sense that the bare notion of syncretism employed in his analysis (and he does not actually use that term) has more to do with worldview than with style. In a piece titled “The Sign System in Chinese Landscape Paintings,” he tries to contrast a Buddhist view of the void with a Taoist view of the absolute, and at a later point a Taoist take with a Confucian view.¹¹ Of a landscape painting featuring mountains, McMahon writes:

Thus the principle of cosmic brotherhood stands at the center of Chinese painting, and leaps out at the viewer when we see a dominant mountain flanked by lesser brother and sister mountains. The suggestion of brotherhood is Taoist, while the sense of hierarchy in proper relationships is Confucian. There has never been any serious incompatibility between Taoism and Confucianism, though there have been tensions. The Tao principle operating in the *Li* forms establishes proper behavior in all things.¹²

Here, the more compatible Taoist and Confucian views might be said to constitute a syncretism, at least insofar as the system of signs operative in this particular painting is concerned. They are distinguishable enough that “there have been tensions,” yet not so separate—as certain forms of Buddhism and Taoism are, on McMahon’s analysis—that we experience difficulty in imagining a fusion or syncretism between them. They can be picked out, as worldview thematizations, but we do not sense that one is a simple and awkward overlay of the other. This brief analysis by McMahon may offer important clues to a valuable clarification of the concept of syncretism: its best paradigms may not be differing “styles” in the visual arts, but differing conceptual schemes, insofar as they manifest themselves, at least occasionally, in stylistic differences. Now perhaps we can account for some of the paradoxical air engendered by the use of the term “syncretism” and its cognates.

V

I have argued throughout this paper that the notion of syncretism is a recondite one, and that at least one art historical style, taken from the art of India and commonly cited in this regard (the Gandhara school) may be more of a hindrance than a help in getting clear on this notion.

In attempting to round out the concept, we have examined not only the Gandhara work—admittedly, according to critics like Rowland, a failure in many respects where syncretism is concerned—but the art of Indonesia, taken conceptually, and the construct usually labeled in the art historical world “Tibetan *tanka*.” If syncretism is a concept that might be at home in the scheme of the golden mean, part of our argument here has been that Gandhara work is too much of an obvious grafting to constitute much of a genuine fusion, and much Indonesian work is virtually indistinguishable from a great deal of the work to be found in India itself. The *tanka*, as an exemplar, seemed closer to what might be required, since commentators such as Muller-Ebeling and Ratsch specifically point out its various ethnic characteristics, while admitting that *tankas* taken as a whole constitute an admissible class.

Finally, we finished our analysis with an allusion to syncretism of conceptual style or worldview, rather than of simple visual style. McMahan’s analysis of signs in Chinese landscape painting provided us with a view of syncretism that, on some level, approximated that exemplified by the *tanka*, while perhaps being more explanatory. The relation of the mountains to each other, as articulated by McMahan, allows for a signification with each mountain, and their grouping as a whole. This gives new strength to the notion of syncretism, and makes it easier for us to deal with it as a concept adequate for art historical purposes.

Syncretism makes its appearance on a regular basis in aesthetic analysis. We would do the notion a disservice if we do not attempt to unpack it and, in a syncretistic spirit, arrive at some final culminating overview.

Notes and References

¹ The long-standing prominent work on the subject is Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India*, Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, Inc., 1967.

² Rowland, *op. cit.*, p. 76

³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁶ David Goldblatt, “The Frequency of Architectural Acts: Diversity and Quantity in Architecture,” in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XLVI, No. 1, Fall 1987, pp. 61-66. This citation p. 62.

⁷ Brochure titled “The Sculpture of Indonesia,” National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., August 1990.

⁸ Claudia Muller-Ebeling and Christian Ratsch address this question in their work *Shamanism and Tantra in the Himalayas*, Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2002. Specifically,

to try to dispel the notion that all that is labeled “Tibetan” actually has its origins in Tibet, they say: “[There was] a long tradition of exchanges and mutual inspiration between Tibet and Nepal. Artists from the Kathmandu Valley were brought to Tibetan monasteries in order to paint *thangkas* for them on commission. They often remained there for years....” (p. 78)

⁹ The authors go into detail with respect to the variations on pp. 84-85, *ibid.*

¹⁰ That the origins of the *tankas* is no small matter is attested to by the very sort of labeling typical of Western art houses and museums to which the authors object. A recent exhibit of similar pieces in New York was titled, by the curators, “Sacred Visions: Early Paintings from Central Tibet.” (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1998; catalog by Harry Abrams, New York, 1998.)

¹¹ Cliff G. McMahan, “The Sign System in Chinese Landscape Paintings,” in *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Spring 2003, pp. 64-76. The contrast is developed most fully on p. 69.

¹² *Ibid.*, *ibid.*

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