

Sculpture in ancient India evolved in tandem with other fine arts, including architecture and painting, showcasing remarkable examples of their development. These interconnected arts are inseparable, as their collective beauty is unimaginable without each other. Sculpture in India flourished in various forms, such as metal and stone sculptures, which could either be incorporated into murals or stand independently. Examining the chronology of sculpture provides practical insights into its evolution in ancient India.

Prehistoric to Pre-Mauryan Age Sculpture

The Upper Palaeolithic period provides the earliest evidence of sculpture in India. A bone statue depicting a mother goddess was discovered in Lohanda Nala, located in the Belan valley. Following this discovery, numerous stone idols were also found. Notably, during the excavation of the Harappan civilization, MohenjoDaro and Harappa yielded a large number of stone sculptures. While these early sculptures were not fully developed, they serve as important examples of the art form of early stages. Particularly noteworthy are the stone statue of a yogi or priest from MohenjoDaro and the bronze dancing girl. The magnificent statues and sculptures of men found in Mohenjodaro and Harappa indicate possible influences from both Sumerian and Indian cultures on the Indus Valley Civilization.



The sculpture of the Indus Valley Civilization encompasses statues depicting both humans and

animals. The human figurines predominantly portray women and exude a greater sense of grace and impressiveness compared to the male idols. Notably, a greater abundance of animal sculptures has been unearthed, showcasing high artistic quality. Among these sculptures, humped bull idols are particularly prevalent. Additionally, statues of elephants, rhinoceroses, monkeys, pigs, bears, and other animals have also been crafted with artistic finesse.

Mauryan sculpture

The Mauryan period witnessed the finest expression of animal figures in sculpture. Particularly noteworthy are four animals that received prominent representation: lions, bulls, elephants, and horses. The bull of Rampurwa stands out as a remarkable and unique masterpiece, captured in a joyful posture. Observing the lifelike portrayal of these animals has sparked a debate regarding the possibility of imported art influencing the Mauryan era. The sudden emergence of such highly developed idols raises questions about their origins. Prior to this period, no well-formed idols have been discovered. However, it is now believed that Mauryan art reflects the gradual evolution of Harappan sculpture. Indeed, idols were likely crafted even during the Harappan era and the transition to the Mauryan period, but their perishable nature, likely made of materials like wood, led to their swift decay. Consequently, their remnants are not present in the present day.

In the Mauryan period, we can also observe examples of folk art. Numerous stone idols of Yaksha-Yakshini have been discovered during this era, standing beneath the open sky. Notable among these idols are the Yaksha of Parkham, the Chamaragrahini of Didarganj, and the Yakshini of Besnagar.



inspiration from the model of the Apollo god.

- **Influence of Roman style-** Furthermore, under Roman influence, the Gandhara style placed particular emphasis on the depiction of costumes, clothing, and ornaments. The idols were adorned in magnificent robes, crowns were intricately portrayed on their heads, and meticulous attention was given to the detailing of earrings and other body ornaments.



Post Mauryan Sculpture

During this period, three distinct styles of sculpture emerged: Gandhara art, Mathura art, and Amaravati art. Each style excelled in its own unique way and earned a prominent position in Indian craftsmanship.

■ Gandhara Sculpture

Gandhara sculpture holds significant importance in the history of Indian sculpture as it introduced a new direction to the art form. The epicenter of Gandhara sculpture was Taxila and its surrounding region in the northwest. The development of this style is often divided into two phases: the first phase spanning until the second century, and the second phase from the second century to the 7th century. One intriguing aspect of Gandhara sculpture is its syncretic nature, showcasing a blend of various styles.

- **Influence of Greek style-** Gandhara art exhibits the influence of Greek style on the physical appearance of its idols. Notably, it portrays a realistic depiction of well-defined muscles. Greek art, renowned for its majestic portrayal of the face of the deity Apollo, also played a significant role. In Gandhara art, statues of Buddha and Bodhisattvas are crafted, drawing

- **Central-Asian Influence-** The Gandhara style experienced transformations influenced by the Sakas and Parthian rulers of Central Asia. While traditionally dark blue or black stone was the primary material used in sculpture-making, the introduction of lime plaster marked a significant shift. Furthermore, under the influence of Parthian rulers, triangular caps became a distinctive feature in the attire of the idols. Another notable addition was the representation of Agni Rekha (Fire Line) in the sculptures. These changes point to the evident influence of Iranian aesthetics on the Gandhara style.

- **Indian influence-** In terms of Indian influence, the face of the idol in Gandhara sculpture reflected a profound sense of spirituality. While the body of the sculptures may have displayed Greco-Roman characteristics, the underlying spirit remained distinctly Indian.

Question- Gandhara sculpture owed as much to the Romans as to the Greeks. Explain.

Answer – Gandhara sculpture holds a significant place in the history of Indian sculpture as it showcases a noteworthy sequence of development. It flourished in Taxila and its surrounding regions in the northwest, which

served as a crossroads for Indian and Greco-Roman cultures. The physical design of Gandhara sculpture was primarily influenced by Greek elements, while Roman influences were evident in its attire and ornamentation. However, at its core, Gandhara sculpture remained deeply rooted in its Indian spiritual essence.

In Greece, gods were depicted in human form, and this artistic tradition influenced the creation of idols of gods in the Greco-Roman art style. When this influence reached the land of India, it gave rise to what is known as “Gandhara Art.” This art form was primarily responsible for making statues of Buddha and Bodhisattvas. In Gandhara Art, a strong emphasis was placed on presenting the physical structure of the idols in a realistic manner. The Greek influence was evident in various aspects such as the musculature, hairstyle, and precise depiction of different body parts. In fact, Buddha was often depicted with similarities to the Greek god Apollo. However, the clothing and ornaments adorning Buddha’s body were influenced by the Roman style. This included the portrayal of transparent clothes, intricate folds, crowns atop the sculpture heads, and other body ornaments. Despite these foreign influences, the Indian touch was not lost as spirituality was also infused into the expressions on the faces of the sculpture, representing the enduring Indian influence on Gandhara Art.

Exercise Question: Highlight the Central Asian and Greco-Bactrian elements in Gandhara art. [UPSC 2019 150 words]

Difference between Mathura and Gandhara styles -

1. Gandhara art originated in Taxila and the surrounding north-west region, while Mathura art flourished in Mathura, Agra, and the neighboring areas.
2. Mathura art was associated with multiple sects including Brahmin, Buddhist, and Jain, whereas Gandhara art was predominantly connected to the Buddhism in the north-west.

3. Gandhara art employed dark blue or black stone as its primary material, while Mathura art utilized red stone.
4. Gandhara art leaned towards realism, highlighting intricate details such as the texture of the idol physical appearance and folds of clothing. In contrast, Mathura art leaned towards idealism. The focus was not on depicting body texture but rather on portraying transparent and closely-fitted garments. The emphasis in Mathura art was on showcasing spirituality primarily through the expressions on the face of the idols, often depicting them deeply involved in contemplation.



■ Amravati Style

This art style thrived in Amravati, Nagarjunakonda, and the surrounding regions under the rule of the Satavahanas and their successors, the Ikshvakus. Marble was utilized as the primary material in this style, resulting in the creation of magnificent and majestic idols.

The idols of the Mathura style prioritize spiritual aspects, while those of the Amravati style pay more attention to worldly elements. In the Amravati style, there is a special focus on sensory details, displaying a sense of richness and luxury in the idols. This shift in emphasis can be attributed to the influence of Roman trade on the society of South India during that time. With an increase in happiness and prosperity, there was a greater attraction towards indulging in sensory pleasures.



Gupta sculpture

During the Gupta period, sculpture reached a pinnacle of artistic excellence and adhered to classical norms. This era witnessed the remarkable maturity of sculpture, which not only influenced artistic expression within India but also left a lasting impact beyond the Indian subcontinent.

During this period, the Sarnath style emerged as a fusion of two renowned sculpture styles, namely Mathura art and Gandhara art. This style produced some of the finest idols of its time. It incorporated the emphasis on lifelike body textures influenced by the Gandhara style, while also portraying spirituality on the idol's face influenced by the Mathura style.

In Gupta sculptures, a remarkable advancement in portraying a divine aura is evident, along with a wide range of expressions skillfully depicted on the faces of the idols. Unlike the earlier Kushan period, where nudity was prevalent, Gupta period idols are adorned with appropriate clothing. Moreover, the Gupta period witnessed significant progress in the creation of metal idols. As an illustration, a massive bronze Buddha statue weighing one ton was unearthed from Sultanganj in Bihar.



Post Gupta Sculpture

■ Pallava Art

The Pallavas built large number of rock-cut temples, showcasing splendid idols of deities. These temples stand as magnificent examples of exceptional sculpture. One notable temple, erected by Narasimhavarman I, having numerous exquisite sculptures. Within Draupadi's chariot, one can find the idol of Durga, while Shiva's idol adorns Arjuna's chariot. Similarly, the idols of Narasimhavarman I himself are installed within Dharmaraja's chariot.

■ Chola Sculpture

During the Chola period, it is widely believed that the art, including sculpture, embraced classical norms. Numerous temples were constructed during this era, serving as homes for intricately crafted idols. One noteworthy example is the Vijayalaya Cholesvara temple in Nartthamalai, which proudly displays a magnificent stone idol. Since the Chola rulers were devout followers of Shaivism, the temples of this period predominantly feature idols of Lord Shiva. Additionally, sculptures of the kings themselves were also made. The Brihadeeswarar temple, commissioned by Rajaraja I, stands as a significant milestone in the evolution of sculptural art.

The sculpture of the Chola period is renowned for its exceptional craftsmanship in copper and bronze. Countless idols depicting gods, kings, and donors were created during this time. Of particular significance is the iconic idol of Shiva Nataraja, which exemplifies the mastery of bronze art. While stone idols were commonly placed within the temples, bronze idols were often found outside the temple premises.



■ Pala sculpture

The art of sculpture flourished in Bengal and eastern India under the patronage of the Pala rulers during the 8th and 9th centuries. The idols made during this period were crafted from black basalt stone. Two renowned artists, Dhiman and Vithpal, played a significant role in the development of this sculpture style and received the patronage of the Pala rulers.

