



## MATHURA ART

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### **Abstract:**

*The Mathura school of sculptural art, which had its origin in the centuries immediately before the commencement of the Christian Era, was greatly stimulated in the Kushana age, which was marked by a cultural acculturation and material prosperity. The art tradition, enriched with new ideas and stylistic traits evolved by numerous talented artists, reached its climax in the Gupta age, when Mathura was still an important religious and cultural centre.*

### **KEY WORDS:**

Mathura, Kushana, Krishna, Yaksa, Buddhist, Gandhara.

### **INTRODUCTION-**

Ptolemy, the ancient Geographer aptly called Mathura as 'The city of Gods'. Mathura, situated along the river Yamuna Lat.27 31' N and Long.77 41' E, towards the north-east of Uttar Pradesh. Though the name 'Mathura' is uncertain etymologically it has been referred to in several Puranas and other literature. According to the Ramayana, the city was founded by Shatrughna, the brother of Rama Dasarathi, after he slew Madhu the asura (demon), who had till then, the known as 'Madhu Forest'. It is well known throughout India, that Mathura is the centre of Krishna Cult. Lord Krishna was born in Mathura as a Ksatriya, was taken away to Vraja (Vrindavan), to be raised as a cowherd and later returned to Mathura, and eventually deified as an avatara of Vishnu-Narayana- Krishna to be one of the most popular deities of Hinduism.

Mathura has yielded an astonishing variety and wealth of sculptural material. The style of Mathura sculpture is of indigenous Indian tradition of the late Maurya and Sunga periods. It displays the massive robust quality as seen in the early Yaksa figures from Parkham- a suburb of Mathura- now displayed in the Govt. Museum, Mathura. Ancient classical literature in Pali, Prakrit, and Sanskrit refers to the worship of Yaksa (Fig 4d) and other folk-deities like, Yaksini's, Naga/Naginis, Salabhanjikas, tree-spirits etc. The worship of the Yaksa Kubera was most popular. About half a dozen colossal images of Yaksa/ Yaksini's have been found in the Mathura region. They convey an idea of immense power and strength of the early examples of folk-art, and also served as models for future Buddhist and Brahmanical iconography. The most important characteristic of the late Maurya and Sunga art at Mathura is that the sculptures are somewhat archaic or folk-art tradition. The drapery is heavy and not light as is the case with the sculptures of later periods. Female figures are seen decorating their headgears with garlands beaded ornaments and cloth. The male figures appear wearing fluffy turbans generally decorated with crest above.

In Buddhist iconography, the absence of the figure of Buddha was most noteworthy feature of the Sunga art. Instead, the figure of Buddha is often depicted in aniconic forms such as stupa, triratna (three pronged symbol), bodh ?rik?as (sacred tree), dharma cakra (the wheel of Law), and so on. It is important to

note that during this period, the iconography of Hinduism was evolving and thus we find the images of Vaishnava, Saiva and Surya (fig.1b) sects such as Balarama, Siva in Linga, and that of Kamadeva carrying his five arrows.

After the Mauryan-Sunga periods, Mathura was dominated by the Saka-Ksatrapas and Kushana rulers who were responsible for the deep rooted foreign influence which is noticeable in the local art traditions. This phenomenon is conveniently called the Kushana art. The period of Kushana rulers Kaniska I, Huviska and Vasudeva had been termed as the golden era of the Kushana art. It was during this period the images of all the three sects viz., Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism as well as several other secular motifs were carved with great skill and perfection. The material used by the sculptor of Mathura was the reddish and spotted sandstone quarried from the nearby Sikri area. Numerous sculptures were executed in the round. The reliefs are deeply cut. It was the human body that captured the artist's interest (fig.1c,d). The figures wear a minimum of garments; their clothing is transparent, giving the impression of nudity. Hefty and somewhat plump males and voluptuous females were models that were richly adorned with jewels are the symbols of the social status in India.

The Mathura artist took special interest in creating royal portraits of the rulers, for instance, the imposing standing (heading) statue, identified as that of Castana, a Saka Satrap, who ruled about 130 C.E. in Ujjain (in M.P.). The tunic and trousers of this figure are Scythian origin which was suited to Nomadic horsemen. The diagonal tunic over the chest and the belt encircling the waist are remarkably rendered. Two other royal portraits from Mathura are of the king Vima Kadphises seated on throne (fig.3b), and the other of King Kaniska I (fig.3a), from the devakula (royal temple). They attest to the skill to the artist. Similar devakulas of the Kushanas are found in Surkh Kotal in Afghanistan. Although the heads of these royal figures are missing, they display the monumental quality of the sculptural art.

Another most favorable subject of Mathura sculptor was that of the figures of demi-gods such as Yaksa/Yaksis (nature-spirits) Naga/Naginis (water-spirits) and salabhanjikas (tree-spirits) (fig.3d) which exhibits a variety of lively postures. On a symbolic level the voluptuous maidens in stone and also in terracotta display the ancient tradition of mother-goddess who symbolizes fertility, while potbellied Kubera yakshas suggest abundance, wealth and protection.

Flora and fauna frequently formed part of sculptural composition (fig.2a). For instance, the hybrid creatures like makara, winged lions or fabulous birds which were perhaps inspired by the Classical West and as transmitted via the art of Gandhara. The animals like lions denote strength and at the same time symbolize the Sakya clan.

The flora too receives special treatment in the art of Mathura for instance, the depiction of the Bodhi-tree under which Buddha meditates, and the fruit-bearing Asoka tree touched by a young woman; the latter symbolizes the fecundity of nature. While the flora motifs shown in the sculptures display purely decorative patterns; the grapes, leaves and vine- scroll motifs symbolize the renewal of life. These motifs are also associated with the yaksa cult.

The most classic examples of the Mathuran art is seen in the so-called bacchanalian themes (fig.2c, 4c), depicting a merry making, now displayed in the National Museum, New Delhi. Yaksa Kubera drinking wine from Palikhera (Mathura) and so-called 'Silenus' now in the Indian Museum, Calcutta are the masterpieces of Kushana art.

It is well known that Mathura was the center of the Hindu Vasudeva (Vishnu-Krishna-Narayana) cult, certainly as early as the first century B.C.E., if not earlier, as is attested by the inscription of the Mahaksatrapa Sodasa, which mentions a shrine dedicated to Vasudeva. This suggests that it is conceivable that Brahmanical shrines and images may have existed at Mathura even earlier than their Buddhist counterparts. Many Kushana coins on their reverse depict Hindu deities, and names of Kushana rulers like Vasudeva suggest that bhakti (pious devotion), and therefore we see many Hindu divinities on Kushana coins. There are images of various Brahmanical deities such as Vishnu, Indra- who is considered as an elder brother of Vishnu as Upendra, Varaha, Narsimha, and other avatars, Balarama, Surya often identified with Vishnu, Surya seated and standing, and several Saivite images are found in Mathura, provide examples of Hindu sculpture.

So far as the origin of Buddha image is concerned, mention must be made of an image from Isapur near Mathura which may be of pre-Kushana date, and demonstrates that the practice of creating Buddha in anthropomorphic form at such an early date was not limited to Gandhara. Buddha sits in a usual vajraparyankasana pose, with his right hand in the gesture of abhaya. Although the image is somewhat in worn out condition, the usanisa and the halo around the head are clearly seen. The four attendants wear knotted turbans and dhoti-like garments, as seen in the art of Sanchi and Bharhut reliefs. The Buddha sits on an inverted five-stepped symbolic Mount Meru which is the cosmic mountain at the center of the universe according to the Buddhist cosmology. Beneath are seen two seated lions suggest Buddha as Sakyamuni.

It is noteworthy that there is a strong similarity in the execution of many seated Buddha in the art of

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Mathura (fig. 1a, 2d, 5a, & 5b). In general the Buddha are seated on *si? hasanas* (lion thrones) flanked by Bodhisattva attendants and the flying vidyadharas hovering above and a large halo around the head. Two examples will testify the craftsmanship of the Mathura workshops during the Kushana period. The Buddha image in the Mathura Museum, discovered in Katra mound in Mathura, has a three line inscription on the lion throne recording that it was dedicated by one Amoha-asi, a Buddhist nun, 'for the welfare and happiness of all sentient beings' which expresses a Mahayanist sentiment. The second example from Ahicchatra (U.P) which carved in the same reddish sandstone is about 67.3 cm high. The notable difference in these two pieces is that the inscription on the throne reveals that it was the gift of Bhiksu Virana for the benefit and happiness of all teachers together with elderly Sramanas and disciples. The inscription is dated in the year 32 (150 C.E.) of Huviska. The flanking Bodhisattvas' are Padmapani and Vajrapani. The format of these two sculptures is of a type that became standard in Kushana and post- Kushana Buddhist art.

The Mathura art during the Kushana period of second-third centuries also depict the life scenes of Sakyamuni Buddha (fig. 5c). The events in general are in abbreviated fashion as is seen in the relief found at Rajghat-Mathura which includes five major events in the life of Buddha- arranged from right to left such as 'the birth', 'the Maravijaya', 'the descent from Trayatri? sa heaven', 'a preaching scene', and finally 'the parinirvana'.

Although no intact architectural monuments so far discovered at Mathura, several architectural pieces suggest the type of architecture that as prevalent in Mathura. The stupa railing from Bhutesvara near Mathura, is carved with voluptuous women standing on dwarf like figures, while amorous couples daily in balconies above. On the back side of these posts are shown various jataka stories. These female figures may be Yaksis or vrksadevatas.(fig. 4a,b).

The proliferation of Buddhist imagery at Mathura, however, numerous Hindu and Jaina iconography are also found. An inscribed standing image of Kartikeya discovered from Kankali Tila in Mathura carved in reddish sandstone is about 83 cm high, and is holding a long spear. Another architectural fragment from Bhutesvar depicts, the worship of enshrined linga (phallus). Besides from other areas few Mukhalingas have been discovered. These pieces suggest the prevalence of Phallic Cult during the Kushana period. The images of Surya as wearing udichya vastra and of other types have been discovered from Kankali Tila in Mathura. The worship of Surya the son god is known in literature since Vedic time, and at Mathura it occurs in pre- Kushana art. Besides Karttikeya, Surya, several other deities like, mother-goddesses, Devi-Lakshmi, Durga, Sarasvati, Parvati and Sapta-matrikas occur at Mathura.

The Jains religion was also equally popular at Mathura. Kankali Tila in Mathura is the rich mound from where several Jaina coins have been discovered. Like Buddha, several seated Jaina Tirthankaras, standing sarvatobhadra Jinas, ayagapattas (Jaina, votive tablets) and etc, are the most noteworthy Jaina sculptures (fig. 2b). One Amohini votive tablet is dated to the seventy-second year of Mahak?atrapa Soasa (C.E. 15) provides an early date for comparable Jaina sculptures.

The non-sectarian aspect in symbolism is also seen in these three religions in Mathura art. During the Gupta and post-Gupta periods Mathura became an important center of Saivism and Vaisnavism (Fig. 5c). However, this religious fervor could not last long. The Mathura and the whole of north India became a victim of the Huna invasion (C.460 C.E.) which caused large scale destruction the political and artistic activities became highly unstable after the downfall of the Guptas. In the seventh century Mathura became a part of Harsha's empire. But the most disastrous was the invasion of Mahmud of Ghazni. This destruction continued until the death of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, who along with several other temples, the great and magnificent temple of Kesavadeva was razed down to ground and a mosque built in its place. The new temples erected during the last 200-300 years are the work of the local feudal lords, the Jat rulers and the Marathas.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT:

I thank my friend Shantanu Subramanian for his valuable suggestions and correcting the final draft. I thank Shri. Devadutta Phule who helped me in preparing the plates. Last but not the least I am grateful to Dr.Ravi Jadhav and Dr.Sanjay Gaikwad who pursued me to write the present article.

**Photo credit:** courtesy- Government Museum, Mathura U.P. Plate 2a & b-British Museum, London.

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Fig.1



a



b



c



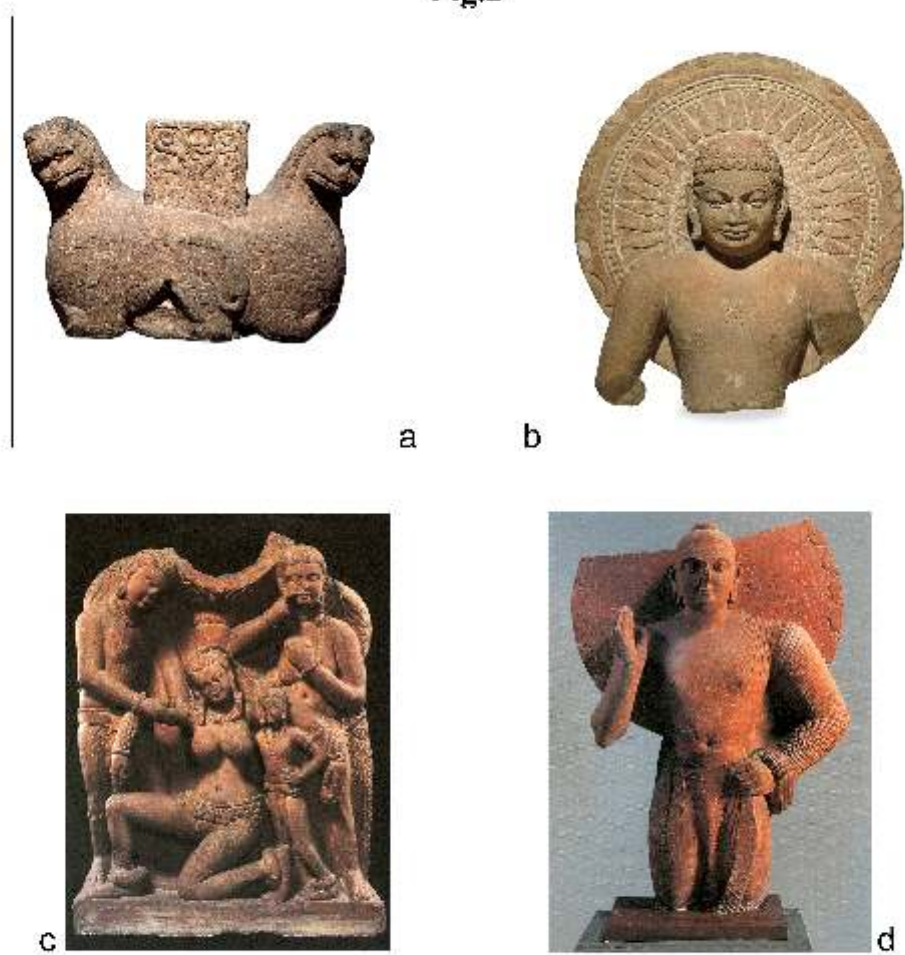
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a) This sandstone image of Buddha from Mathura embodies the typical characteristics of Mathura Art of the Kushana Period. Buddha, wearing a heavily folded Uttaraya, seated under the Bodhi tree, is shown attended upon by two flanking Bodhisattva figures. He is seated on a lion throne which may be taken to symbolize his status as Sakya Simha. There is a great sense of frontality in the sculptural depiction and the positioning of the torso, another feature which is very characteristic of Kushana Art. Above his head one can see a simple Prabhavamsulaki and to the sides are two flying figures paying obeisance to the Buddha. The pedestal is inscribed with Brahmi characters.

b) This interesting image from the Kushana period has been identified as that of Surya. A two armed seated Surya is shown chiseling at his feet and this image comes directly out of mythology. Surya is shown with a simple turban and sparse ornamentation. The detailing of his creases nevertheless are shown with great articulation.

c & d) These images of women with beautifully molded torsos in red sandstone exemplify the characteristics of Mathura art. They are depicted with delicateness of expression, yet decked with heavy ornamentation and are shown in a sort of frontality typical of Kushana Art.

Fig.2



- a) This architectural fragment from Mathura is preserved at the British Museum. It shows two lions, one overlapping the other. Though the lions are very feeble artistically as compared to the earlier Mauryan specimens, they are characteristic of Kushāna Art. Between them is a medallion with a floral motif and Triratna in relief.
- b) This beautiful image of an unidentified Tirthankara on yellowish red sandstone is from Mathura and presently housed in the British Museum, London. The prabhavandana is beautifully ornate with various geometric motifs. Judging from the placement of the arms, this was most probably a seated image.
- c) This banachandika scene has been cited as one of the masterpieces of Indian Art. It depicts a central kneeling woman holding or supported by a child, variously believed to be in an inebriate state flanked by a man and woman. The image is shown in the same characteristic frontality of Kushāna Art from Mathura.
- d) This standing Buddha image from the Kushāna period is typical of Mathura Art. Buddha is shown with a thick Uttarīya drapery with folds. He is depicted with a simple round prabhavandana and a great sense of frontality.

Fig.3



a) The famous headless image of Kushāna King Kanishka is an interesting and unique specimen of Mathura Art. It represents a lesser known genre of Kushāna royal portraits of which only a few examples are known. Kanishka is shown in a non indigenous dress holding a sword in each hand. He is also shown wearing heavy boots.

b) This lesser known seated image of a Kushana King was found at the site of Maat, near Mathura. Sculpted in red sandstone, it depicts the King seated on a lion throne. Alongside the Kanishka image, this represents few of the rare Kushāna royal portrait sculptures.

c) The head of the Buddha is shown with a prominent urna (mark on forehead) and a typical ushnisha (hair knot on the head). The ushnisha, characteristic of Kushāna art is conch like. The image is very expressive and this is accentuated by the detailing of the eyes and lips.

d) The image of Shalabhanjika may have been part of a larger architectural fragment. It depicts the gracefully standing torso of the Shalabhanjika holding a tree branch. The flora shown in the background in relief is highly stylized. The Shalabhanjika is shown with heavy ornamentation typical of Kushāna period sculptures.

**Fig.4**



a



b



c



d

A & b) These are part of architectural members, most likely stambhas of the Vedika railing. They are depicted with images of female figures in various playful attitudes. They represent a great artistic leap over the Bharhut sculptures. The nude figurines are embellished with heavy ornamentation and the tresses are greatly detailed.

c) This Bacchanalian scene shows a seated man (or deity) drinking from a cup. He is attended upon and served by three persons and a child. The flora depicted in relief in the background is of a diverse variety.

d) Images of Yakshas are common in early Mathura Art. This image of a seated pot bellied Yaksha is shown in a calm attitude and is embellished with ornamentation.

**Fig.5**



a



b



c

a & b) Buddha's are seated on *sihasanas* (lion thrones) flanked by *Bodhisattva* attendants and the flying *vidyadhara*s hovering above and a large halo around the head.  
c) This Gupta period image of a Brahmanical deity, most probably *Vishnu*, was discovered at Mathura. The ornamentation and overall stylistic treatment of the image alludes to its association with the Gupta period art. The torso is more realistic as compared to the *Kushāna* sculptures and the ornamentation is detailed yet light. The drapery itself is light and preserves beautiful life like folds