Sculpture - Head of a Bodhisattva

Object: Sculpture
Place of origin: Peshawar (near, made)
Date: late 2nd century-3rd century (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Schist with traces of pigment and gold
Credit Line: Given by F. St. G. Manners Smith, Esq. C.I.E.
Museum number: IM.4-1919
Gallery location: South-East Asia, Room 47a, case 8

Public access description
The fine carving of this head indicates that it belonged to a standing bodhisattva image of very high quality. (Bodhisattva is the name given to one on the path to becoming a buddha.) It has an elaborate headdress, constructed of ribbons and jewels. The central cockade (now missing) originally slotted onto the raised tapering tenon on a disc prominently displayed at the centre of the turban and bejewelled diadem. This probably displayed the attribute identifying the specific bodhisattva this head belonged to.

The beautifully carved head has an auspicious forehead mark (‘urna’) and the wavy moustache much favoured in the Gandharan school of Kushan Buddhist art. The Museum records indicate that this sculpture was ‘found near Peshawar’, in the Gandharan region. The head in not worked fully in the round. This suggests that it was intended to be displayed against a temple structure or in a wall niche.

In Gandharan art, images of the Buddha are often flanked by two attendant bodhisattvas, Maitreya and Avalokitesvara. Bodhisattvas also began to be worshipped as independent deities in this period. They were clearly distinguished from the Buddha by their princely attire.

Scientific analysis has revealed evidence of polychrome over a stucco ground with traces of gilding in the headdress. This confirms the widespread use of polychrome on stone as well as stucco sculptures.

Descriptive line
Head of a Bodhisattva, schist, reportedly Peshawar, Gandhara, Pakistan, Late 2nd-3rd century

Dimensions
Height: 23 cm, Width: 15 cm

Museum number
IM.4-1919

Object history note
Presented by F St G Manners Smith

Historical context note
Images of the Buddha are often, in Gandharan art, flanked by two attendant bodhisattvas, Maitreya and Avalokitesvara. Bodhisattvas also appear to begin to be worshipped as independent deities. They are distinguished from the Buddha by their princely attire. This head has an elaborate headdress, constructed of ribbons and jewels. The central cockade, now missing, probably displayed the attribute identifying which of the two bodhisattvas this head belonged to. Technical analysis has revealed evidence of polychrome over a stucco ground with traces of gilding above. It appears that many of the stone sculptures of Gandhara were originally richly painted.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O24838/head-of-a-bodhisattva-sculpture-unknown/