Public access description

This beautiful head of the Buddha was once part of a large-scale narrative panel modelled in high relief. It formed part of a life-size figure, probably of Gautama the Buddha as a young man. Like much Gandharan stucco, this head was originally richly polychromed, and traces of red remain on the lips, eyelids and hair.

The face was shaped from a mould. Examples of such moulds have been found in excavations at Gandharan sites, which indicates such figures were manufactured at the monasteries where they were installed. However, the hair and other features were modelled by hand. A flat surface on the reverse indicates that the head was attached to a surface behind rather than free-standing. The remaining wall fragment probably formed part of the Buddha’s nimbus.

The head displays several of the characteristic auspicious marks (‘laksanas’) of the Buddha. These include the prominent hair-knot (‘ushnisha’), which here has been treated in a Graeco-Roman style unlike contemporary Indian styles. Another of the marks is the forehead mark (‘urna’). The elongated earlobes are an allusion to the Buddha’s former princely status when he wore pendant earrings.

Descriptive line

Head of the Buddha, stucco with polychrome, probably Taxila, Pakistan, 4th-5th century

Physical description

No style of Indian art is more easily assimilated into the Western canon than Gandharan sculpture. Numerous monasteries, shrines and stupas, richly decorated with stone and stucco, were commissioned by the merchant communities. Like other Gandharan stucco, this head was originally richly coloured. It displays several of the characteristic marks of the Buddha: the prominent hair-knot (ushnisha), here treated in a Graeco-Roman manner unlike contemporary Indian styles; the forehead mark (urna); and the elongated earlobes, an allusion to his former princely status when he wore pendant earrings. The head formed part of a life-size figure, probably of Gautama the Buddha as a young man. It bends slightly to the left with downward gaze, and is clean shaven. Traces of red remain on the lips and eyelids. The face was shaped from a mould, but the hair etc were modelled by hand.

Dimensions

Height: 29.2 cm, Width: 18 cm, Depth: 19 cm

Museum number

IM.3-1931

Object history note

Bought from Messrs Spink

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O25038/head-of-the-buddha-sculpture-unknown/