

The British  
Museum

The Asahi Shimbun Displays

# SAKYAMUNI BUDDHA

The Icon of Gandhara

*Opening 3 September 2015*

Free  
Room 3  
Objects in Focus

Open late Fridays  
[britishmuseum.org](http://britishmuseum.org)

*Curated by Bilwa Kulkarni*





# SAKYAMUNI BUDDHA : The Icon of Gandhara

Opening 3 September 2015

The Asahi Shimbun Displays

Curated by Bilwa Kulkarni, CSMVS, Mumbai



## Sakyamuni Buddha

2nd – 3rd century CE

Takht-i-Bahi (in present day Pakistan)

Gandhara, Kushan period

Grey Schist

1889,1109.1

Explore and enjoy the elegance of Gandharan art through this iconic image of the Sakyamuni Buddha.

Sakyamuni is a pre-eminent Buddhist personage in the Kushan period of Gandharan art. The art revolves heavily around the image of Buddha and scenes from his life. The iconography remains more or less the same. This points to the possibility that the life of Sakyamuni may have served as the most eloquent demonstration of the Buddhist dharma, and therefore the image of the Buddha probably served an iconographic template in Gandhara. The Gandharan style while influenced by Indic art traditions also took inspiration from Western traditions, which reflects the Indian assimilationist conventions that give a unique place in the world.

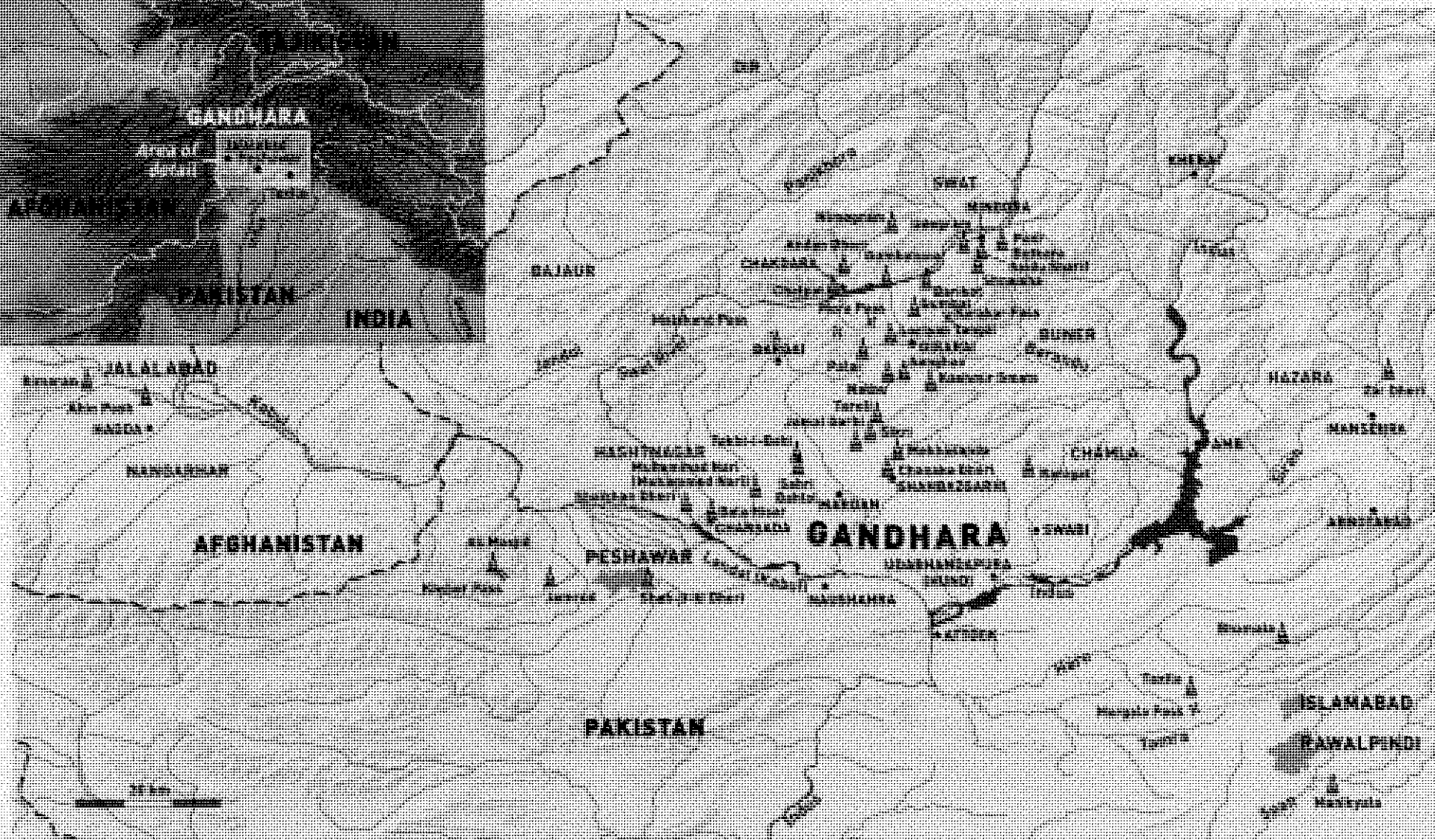
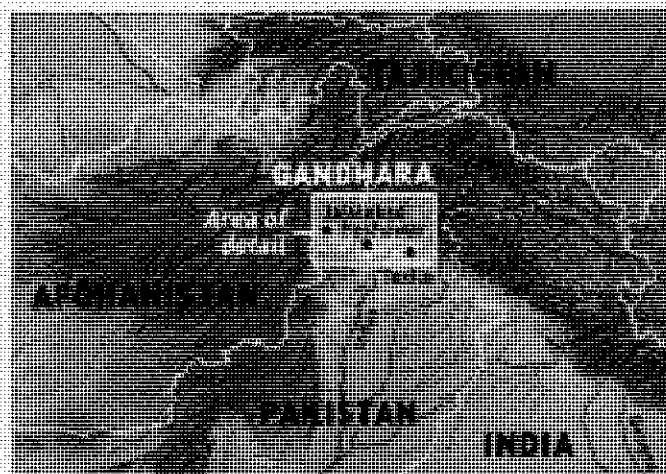
This exhibition explores the various following themes:

- Seeing the Buddha – Iconic representation of the Buddha
- The Buddha as Icon – the iconography
- The Landscape and Society of Gandhara
- Buddha: meeting of styles
- Patronage under the Kushans

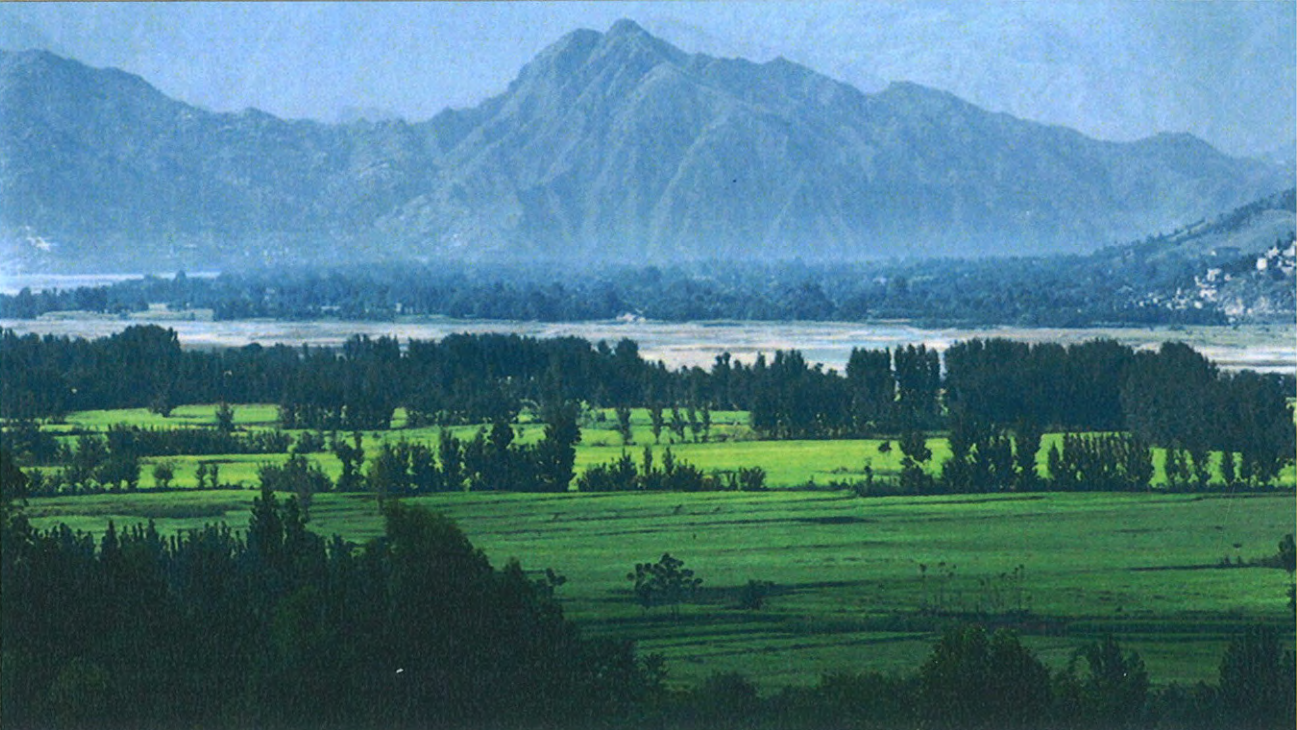


## **The Landscape of Gandhara**

Gandhara was an ancient kingdom situated in the present-day Peshawar valley in Pakistan, known for its characteristic Buddhist art. Gandhara was one among the small kingdoms in northwest Asia such as Bactria and Kapisa (in present-day Afghanistan) and Uddiyana (Swat Valley, Pakistan). These kingdoms flourished from the 1st century BCE onwards. The region, as a whole, is referred to as Gandhara or Bactro-Gandhara. Being an important link on the Silk Road, this region saw the rise of a heterogeneous society of Greek traders, nomadic tribes from western Asia, Indic and Chinese peoples. The Sakas (Scythians) and Parthians moved into these regions from Iran earlier in the 1st century CE. The resulting confluence of diverse cultures led to the development of the distinct religious and artistic tradition of Gandhara.

























## **Amalgamation of Contributory Influences**

The Gandharan style evolved between the first centuries BCE and CE. Around this time, the aniconic tradition of depicting Buddha through symbols (such as the stupa, the Bodhi tree, the empty seat, the wheel, or the footprints) had given way to iconic tradition of image-making. The Indian, Parthian and Hellenistic elements of sculpture were combined to form the distinct style of the early Kushan period. The content was Indian, the stylisation Western. The art reflects Indian influences, probably from Mathura which are seen in Taxila and Butkara. The naturalism of sculptures in terms of the human body, robes and scale reflects Hellenistic and Roman traditions. The friezes, too, show a division in space and time, resembling the composition of Parthenon friezes in Greece.



## **The Sacred Iconography**

Standing Buddha images are one of the most common subjects in Gandharan art of the Kushan period. These were usually found in niches or on benches and platforms or positioned against a wall. While these figures may vary slightly from region to region, they show remarkable similarity in pose, costume, mudras (gestures) and lakshanas (characteristics of Buddha). Standing Buddha or Sakyamuni is one of the most pre-eminent personages in Gandharan art of the Kushan period. In the multi-cultural society of the Gandharan region, Sakyamuni and his life-stories from the Jatakas (Stories on the life of Buddha) were perhaps the most persuasive embodiment of the Buddhist



**Prabha**  
The halo of  
Enlightenment

**Urna**  
a tuft or whorl of  
hair between the  
eyebrows

**Abhaya Mudra**  
gesture of reassurance

**Ushnisha**  
A bump designating  
spiritual intelligence  
Is represented a bun on  
top of Buddha's head

**Elongated Earlobes**  
Reminiscent of Buddha's life as  
prince Siddhartha where he wore  
royal ear adornments  
(symbolic of worldly comforts)

**Robes**  
Chiefly 3 monastic robes were  
worn:  
1. Antarvasaka - lower under-robe  
2. Uttarasanga - upper underrobe  
3. Sanghati - Over-robe



**Attributes (lakshanas)**



## **Life Stories of the Buddha**

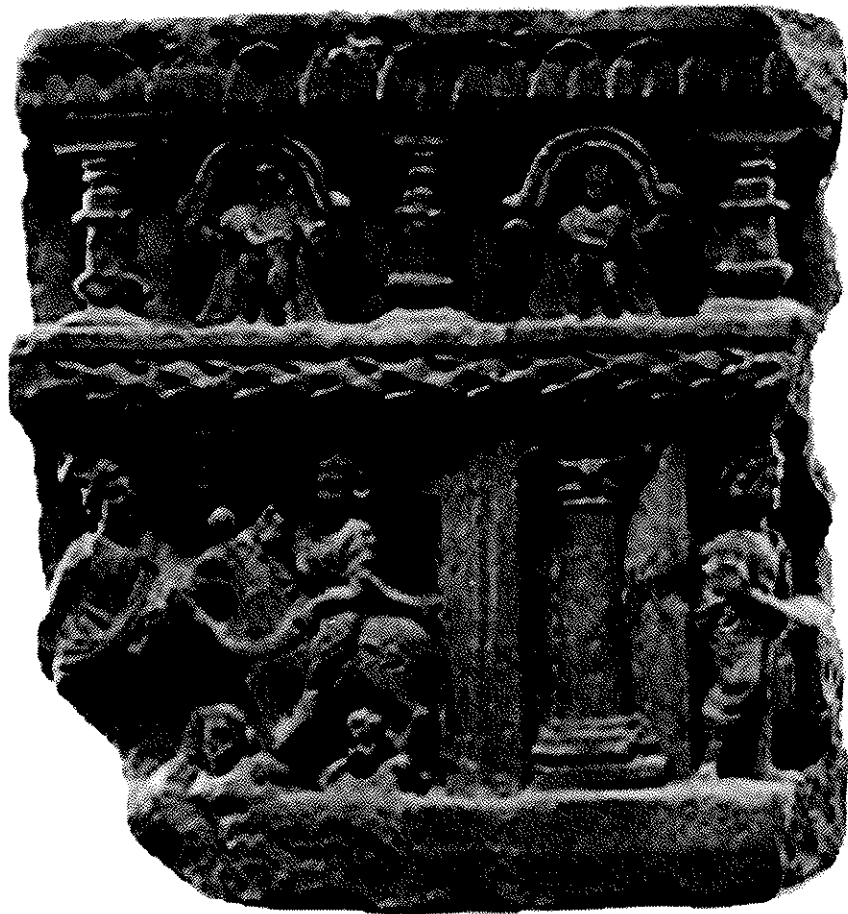
Some friezes from the Kushan period depict phases from the life cycle of Sakyamuni. These life-scenes were intended to reveal the message of Sakyamuni's life. Among these life-scenes, the important ones are those depicting the birth of the Sakyamuni Siddhartha, his first meditation, the Great Departure in pursuit of truth and knowledge, his victory over the demon Mara, his first sermon at the deer park at Sarnath and the mahaparinirvana or the passing away and salvation of the Sakyamuni.





The Birth of Buddha





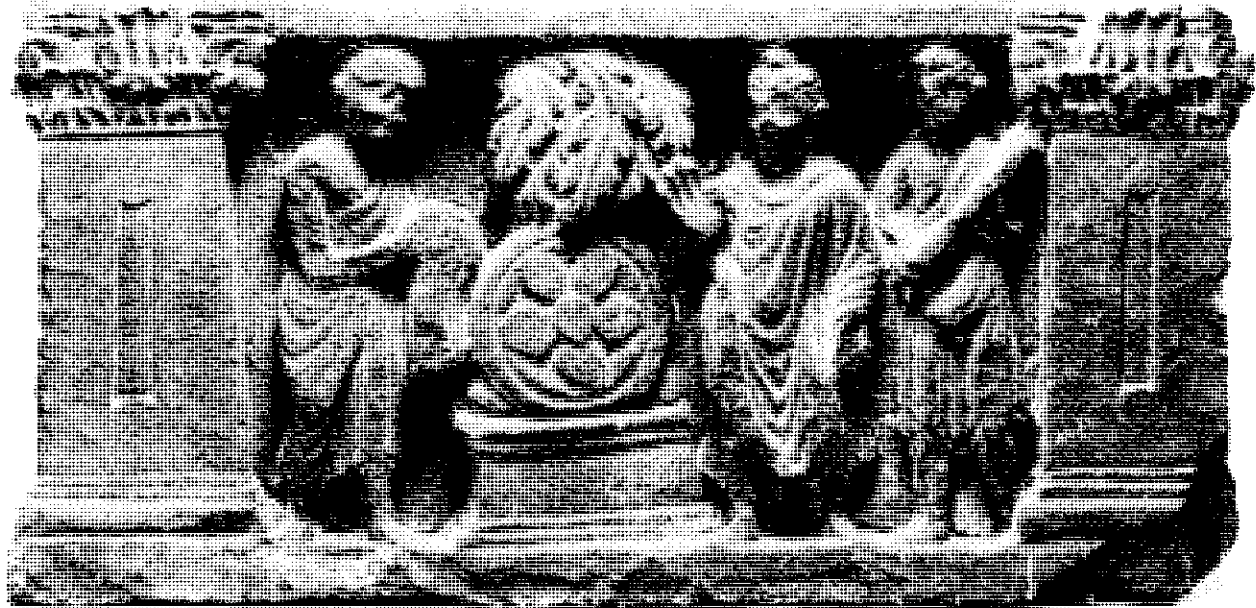
The Great Departure





The Defeat of the demon Mara





The First Sermon at the Deer Park in Sarnath





Mahaparinirvana  
Passing away and attainment of salvation of the Buddha

## **Buddhism in Gandhara**

The art of Gandhara was mainly Buddhist. Buddhist canons tell us of the missions sent to the Gandharan regions by the Indian emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan Dynasty (ca. 272 – 232 BCE). During this period, two major monuments, the Great Stupa at Butkara and the Dharmarajika Stupa at Taxila were built. The Indo-Greek king Menander is also said to have patronised Buddhism as did the Kushan rulers who followed in the 1st century onwards. Many stupas were built in the 1st century BCE and 1st century CE.

Buddhism offered an easier way of assimilating various peoples who came to these lands into the society than the caste-based Brahmanical religion. During the Kushan period, the Gandharan region transformed into a land of Buddhist pilgrimage with many thousands of monasteries built across the region.



## Copper Coins of Kanishka

The Kushan coins follow the Hellenistic traditions of depicting the king (portrayed as Son of God) on one side and the deity on the other. Kanishka included the Buddha image on copper and gold coins as a mark of patronage. The obverse of the coins show Kanishka in a heavy coat, high boots, sword and a spear in the left hand, making an offering at the fire altar. The reverse shows an image of Sakyamuni in a gesture of reassurance. The coins bear the names of the figures in the Bactrian script.

128-150 CE

Afghanistan, Kushan period

Copper

1922,0424.3585 and 1844,0921.29





## **Patronage by Kushan rulers**

The Kushans were a branch of the Yueh-zhi tribes, originally from the Kan-su region of northwestern China. By the 1st century, one of their kings, Kujula Kadphises founded the dynasty that overran Central Asia, Afghanistan and Gandhara. His successors continued this expansion, especially Kanishka I who extended the empire into the heart of India, including Mathura and Sarnath. The Gandharan art reached its peak during the Kushan period under the patronage of its rulers. The political expansion also aided the spread of Buddhism. Kanishka I is renowned in Buddhist literature as a great patron. Under his patronage, Buddhist art production gained significant stimulus. He is said to have built the largest stupa in all of his empire in his capital city, Kanishkapura. He convened the Fourth Buddhist Council in Kashmir. He also commissioned a large number of copper and gold coins with images of the Buddha.

## **Sakyamuni Buddha in abhaya-mudra**

The Gandhara style of art flourished in 1st – 3rd century CE in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kashmir and was influenced by western and Indic traditions. This elegant sculpture of the standing Sakyamuni in abhaya-mudra (gesture of reassurance) depicts a serene face with wavy hair running back into the ushnisha (mound) and a large urna (whorl) between the eyebrows. The shapely lips above a jutting chin, elongated ears, dense drapery folds, the flexed-knee posture add a stately grace to the figure.

2nd – 3rd century CE

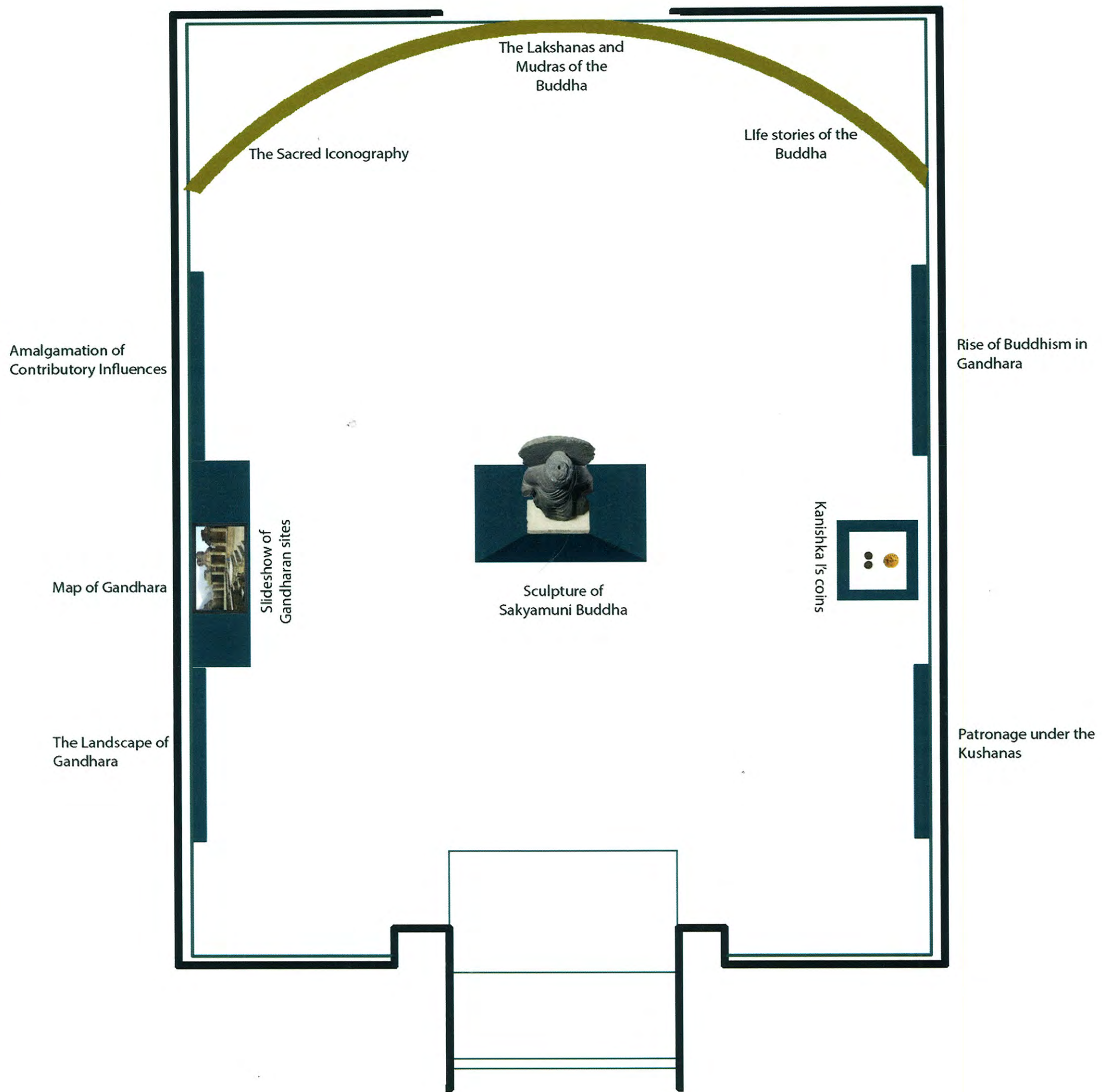
Takht-i-Bahi (in present day Pakistan), Gandhāra, Kushan period

Stone (grey schist)

1889,1109.1

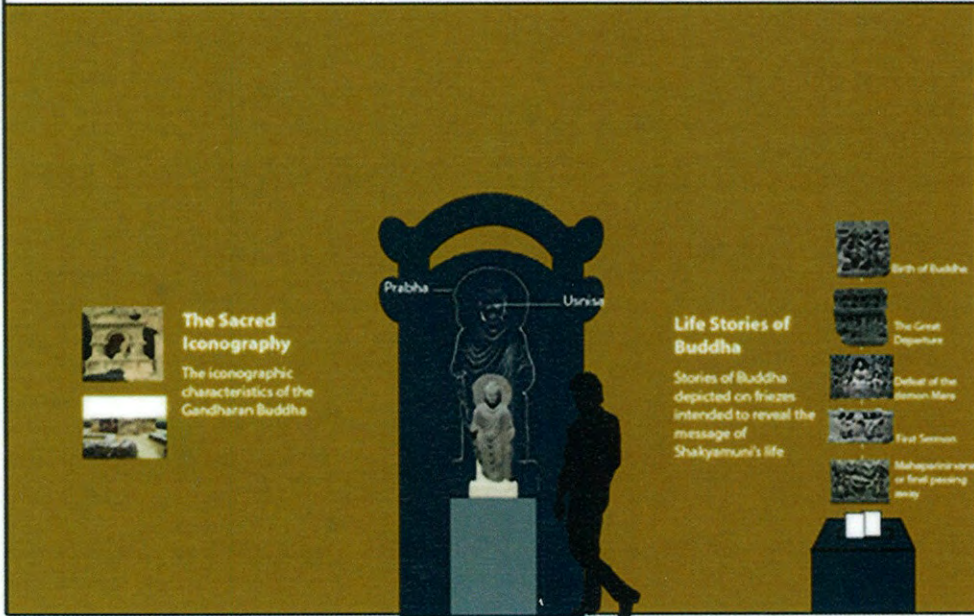


# Exhibition Layout





# Exhibition Layout





September – October 2015

## Sakyamuni Buddha : The Icon of Gandhara

### PROGRAMMES

#### School Sessions at the Museum

##### Teachings of the Buddha

KS1 and KS2

Students learn about the basic tenets of Buddhism and the story of Buddha.

Session lasts 45 minutes



##### Kushans and the Coins (handling session)

KS 2, 3, 4

Students learn about Kushan ideas of divine kingship and their patronage to the Buddhist religion.

Session lasts 45 minutes

##### Tales from the Jatakas

KS1

With the help of the Gandhara panels, students listen to stories of Buddha and understand their significance in the Buddhist religion.

Session lasts 45 minutes

#### Family Activities

Saturdays and Sundays



##### Gallery Walk the Talk

11.00am

Gallery talk by the curator around the exhibition

Gallery talk lasts 45 minutes

#### Adult Learning

Evening Lectures

**Western Influences on Gandhara: Challenges and Fallacies**

8<sup>th</sup> September 2015 | 6pm

##### Open Art Workshop

11.00am – 3.00pm

Participate in quick and easy art activities.

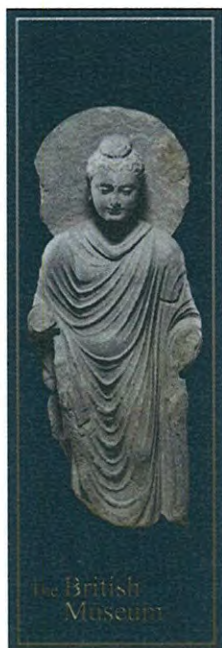
Create a coin or learn to write in Bactrian

Greek or try your hand at sculpture modeling.

These activities are conducted by art facilitators.

Suitable for all ages

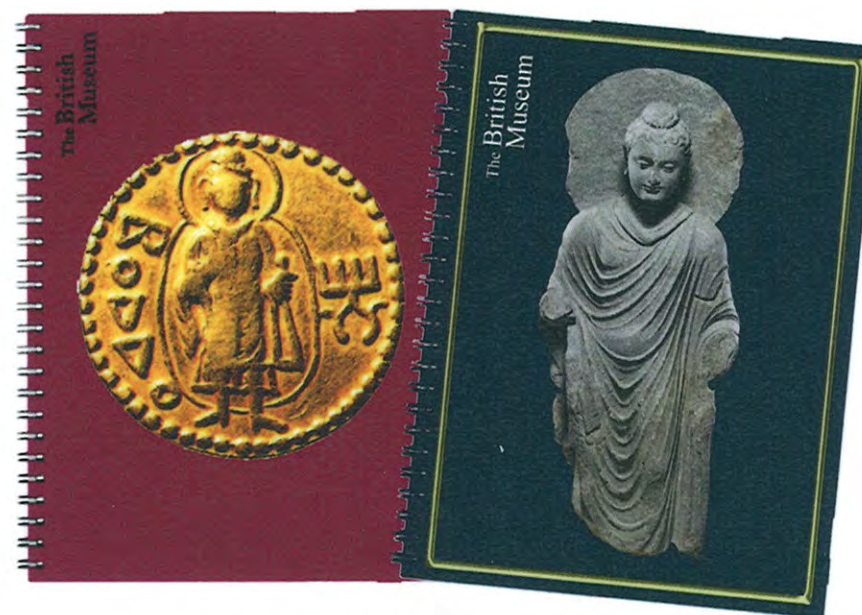
## Sakyamuni Buddha – Exhibition Merchandise



Sakyamuni bookmark £2.99



Kushan coin bookmark £9.99



Sakyamuni note book £6.99

Kushan coin note book £9.99



Kushan coin key ring £3.99