

1-1-2008

A Comparison of Religious Iconography - Buddha and Christ

Isabelle Sabau

College of DuPage, sabaui@cod.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/nehscholarship>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sabau, Isabelle, "A Comparison of Religious Iconography - Buddha and Christ" (2008). *Philosophical Ideas and Artistic Pursuits in the Traditions of Asia and the West: An NEH Faculty Humanities Workshop*. Paper 4.
<http://dc.cod.edu/nehscholarship/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at DigitalCommons@C.O.D.. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophical Ideas and Artistic Pursuits in the Traditions of Asia and the West: An NEH Faculty Humanities Workshop by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@C.O.D.. For more information, please contact koteles@cod.edu.

College of DuPage Online Publication For NEH Workshop

Module Title: **A comparison of religious iconography – Buddha and Christ**

Author: Dr. Isabelle Sabau

Email – sabaui@cod.edu

Introduction:

The purpose of this module is to compare the visual expressions representing the lives of two significant religious figures – the Buddha and Jesus Christ – whose lives were imaged figuratively for both meditation and didactic uses. In both cases imagery progressed from the aniconic stage to the figurative employing important events from the life of the individual. Parallels can be found in the miraculous birth of both persons, their struggles – in the case of the Buddha to achieve enlightenment, while in the case of Jesus the agony and crucifixion, and the miracles each performed thereby convincing and persuading their followers of the truth of their words.

Learning Objectives:

- To analyze and illustrate the development of religious imagery in Buddhism and Christianity.
- To distinguish iconographic elements in the visualization of religious imagery both East and West.
- To develop and improve critical thinking skills through the use of both verbal and writing exercises based on the comparison of imagery East and West.
- To synthesize and evaluate the common elements in the visualization of important spiritual aspects and ideas in both Buddhism and Christianity.

Assignment:

Read the following texts and view the websites below to analyze the content of the artwork both stylistically and iconographically. Choose four images – two from Christian iconography and the other two from Buddhist iconography – and fully compare them in

terms of their representation of events, importance for the understanding of religious symbolism and stylistic characteristics, and post your fully developed answer on the discussion board, also make sure to respond to colleagues.

In the textbook Exploring the Humanities by **Laurie Schneider Adams**, ISBN 0-13-049091-1 Read Chapter 6 page 134 – Cross-cultural Influences Hellenism and the Far East and Chapter 8 - Christianity pp. 191- 205

Important questions to consider from the textbook readings:

- What did the Buddha discover and preach?
- What are the differences between the Gandhara and the Mathura styles of Buddhist sculpture?
- What was the contribution of Constantine the Great to the spread of Christianity?
- How did Justinian influence art and architecture?

View and read the following websites about the **Life of Christ**

Early Christian and Byzantine art

<http://www.ou.edu/class/ahi4263/byzantine.html>

The art of Giotto

<http://www.wga.hu/tours/giotto/padova/index23.html>

View and read the following websites about the **Life of Buddha:**

Life of the Buddha

<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/lifebuddha/index.htm>

<http://www.as.miami.edu/phi/bio/Buddha/bud-life1.htm>

Scenes from the Life of the Historical Buddha

<http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/svision/i27.html>

The Eight Auspicious Symbols

<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/b8symbol.htm>

Mudras: Symbolic Hand Gestures

<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/mudras.htm>

Lecture Notes

Christianity arose in the Holy Land in the 1st century Common Era (CE), when this area was a province of the Roman Empire. Christianity has its roots in Judaism, and is based on the Old Testament, combined with the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth as they are embodied in the New Testament gospels, written some thirty years after Jesus' death. The principal tenets of Christianity rest on the belief that Jesus is the Son of God, who was sent to earth out of the infinite compassion and love God has for the world, to redeem humanity, and thus, he died on the cross and was later resurrected. Christianity adheres to the monotheistic belief that there is one God who created the universe with all that exists in it, and this God is active in history, guiding and teaching his people, who are committed to specific rules and principles of action. The history of Christianity begins in Galilee when an angel visited the Virgin Mary in Nazareth, to announce that God had chosen her to bear his son Jesus who was born around 3 BCE in a manger in Bethlehem. After his Baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus' ministry begins, during which time he performed many miracles and gave a number of sermons preaching love and charity, emphasizing a personal relationship with God, the forgiveness of sins, and the promise of life after death, stressing to his disciples his mission with its focus of the new community he was creating.

Buddhism originated in India at the foot of the Himalayan Mountains in the 6th century Before the Common Era (BCE), and has its roots in the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, better known as the Buddha. The historical Buddha was born a prince but after witnessing four encounters: old age, illness, death and a monk, he made four great vows: to save all people, to renounce all worldly desires, to learn all the teachings and to attain perfect Enlightenment, and thus he renounced his comfortable life in search for the explanation of pain and suffering in the world. After many struggles, the Buddha achieved enlightenment by discovering the Four Noble Truths – namely, that - Life is suffering, Suffering comes from desire, Suffering can end through the end of desire and attachment and the Eight Fold Path of right life, thus morality and meditation will lead to wisdom and nirvana. Buddhism is based on the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma which is the karmic cycle of the wheel of law and the Shanga or community of monks whose mission is to advise and help the rest of humanity understand the teachings of the Buddha.

The earliest Christian related images were based on symbols, the fish, the Chi-Rho symbol, recognizable by the initiates and in part used to evade persecution by the Romans. For the first few centuries Buddhist art was also aniconic, the footprints of the Buddha, the empty throne under the Bodhi tree, or the wheel of the law - all symbolically alluding to the historical figure and his teachings. Early Christian art originated in the Graeco-Roman world and at first appropriated some of the conventional elements prevalent at that time, stressing the message of salvation and the promise of eternal life after death. In 313 CE the Roman emperor Constantine proclaimed the Edict of Milan, also known as the Edict of Toleration, which effectively stopped all persecution of the Christians and made Christianity a lawful religion that granted freedom of worship to all Christians, although Christianity did not become the official state religion of the Roman empire until the reign of Theodosius I in 380 CE. The earliest figurative images in Buddhism arose in the 3rd century BCE under King Asoka from where the message and the imagery spread to Sri Lanka, reaching SE Asia to the south and Tibet and China to the north by the 5th century CE.

The story of Jesus' life was represented visually in icons and mosaics starting in Nazareth with the Annunciation, when the archangel Gabriel announced to Mary that she will miraculously conceive and give birth to God's son. God's presence at the Incarnation is symbolically represented by the dove of the Holy Spirit. The Nativity of Christ takes place at night, in Bethlehem, in a manger amidst a donkey and a cow – symbols of all creation, and the Virgin and Child are usually centrally located, while a star shines brightly above the child indicating the divine light. The beginning of Jesus' public ministry is marked by his baptism at the age of thirty by John the Baptist in the Jordan River with the dove of the Holy Spirit appearing and God's voice proclaiming Jesus as his son. Baptism is a significant rite enabling the Christian to become initiated in the religion and partake in the various sacred ceremonies. In the course of his teaching and travels, Jesus performed many miracles including acts of healing, raising of the dead Lazarus after he had been entombed for four days, turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana, walking on water, and creating large quantities of food at the multiplication of fish and loaves, thus revealing his divine nature. The Transfiguration occurred when Jesus revealed his divine nature in a dazzling vision on Mount Tabor in Galilee as his closest disciples – Peter, James and John – look on and a heavenly voice proclaims Jesus to be God's son. The Entry in Jerusalem took place on Palm Sunday – the Sunday before his Crucifixion, as Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey accompanied by his disciples and was greeted enthusiastically by crowds of people who placed palm fronds in his path. In Jerusalem, Jesus celebrated Passover with his disciples and during this Last Supper he foretold of his imminent betrayal, arrest and death and instructed his disciples to remember him when they eat bread – symbol of his body and drink wine – symbol of his blood. This ritual became the central celebration of Mass – the Eucharist – in the Christian Church. Afterward, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he struggled to overcome his human fear of pain and death and prayed for divine strength. One of the disciples, Judas Iscariot agreed to betray Jesus to the Jewish authorities in return for thirty pieces of silver with the prearranged signal of a kiss which led to Jesus' arrest. After his arrest, Jesus was taken before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, and charged with treason for calling himself the King of the Jews. Jesus was whipped and mocked by the Roman soldiers and then crucified on Good

Friday in 33 CE at Golgotha - the place of the skull where Adam was buried. The events of the suffering of Christ are commemorated in the Passion cycle. After the Crucifixion, Jesus' body was removed from the cross and wrapped in linen anointed with myrrh and aloe, as the grief-stricken Virgin, John the Evangelist, Joseph, Nicodemus of Arimathea and Mary Magdalene mourned over the body of Jesus – a scene known as the Lamentation. The body was then entombed and a large rock was rolled in front of the entrance to the tomb. During the three days he spend in the tomb, Jesus, no longer a mortal human, but now a divine Christ, descended into Hell or Limbo and triumphantly freed the souls of the righteous including Adam, Eve, Moses, Solomon and John the Baptist. This scene is called Descent into Limbo, The Harrowing of Hell or The Anastasis in the Eastern Church. On the third day – Easter Sunday – Christ rose from the dead and left the tomb and an angel announced Christ's resurrection. During the forty days between Christ's resurrection and his ascension to heaven, he appeared on several occasions to his followers and on the fortieth day on Mount of Olives, in the presence of the Virgin and the apostles, Christ gloriously ascended to heaven on a cloud.

The story of the Buddha's life also begins in a miraculous event as his mother, Queen Maya, had a dream in which a white elephant appeared and entered her side mirroring the nativity scene in which he is shown exiting from her side to be born as Prince Siddhartha, the only son of king Suddhodana of the Sakiya clan, at Kapilavatthu, the capital city of Kosala, a district extending from southern Nepal to the Ganges. The next step in the progression of the events is the prediction of the hermit rishi Asita, who prophesied the child's future as a fork in a road – either he will be a great leader of men as a king or as a spiritual guide. This event was followed by the incessant, though ultimately futile attempts of the king to shelter the child and completely remove him from the realm of everyday life, keeping a close watch on the range of the Buddha's experiences. The princes' palace life culminates in his marriage to Yasodhara with whom he had a son, Rahula. During his outings he encountered the four signs that will eventually determine him to renounce his princely life. The story tells us that the Buddha encountered on the first three occasions old age, illness and death – sightings which greatly distressed him but the fourth outing provided the encounter with a monk thus consoling him and

showing him the way. Thus the young Buddha escapes during the night after taking a last glimpse at his wife and child and to emphasize his resoluteness, he renounces all the princely finery and comfortable life in exchange for the monk's rags and begging bowl, both symbols of a mendicant monk. The tonsure is the most often represented image since it shows the future Buddha cutting his own hair with his sword. Having completed his renunciation, the Buddha faced his new life of wandering barefooted with begging bowl in hand throughout the countryside in search for the troubling answers. His transformation was now complete and the process of the search for enlightenment took the Buddha through a year of studying and 6 years of severe asceticism, which though in the end futile, provide for of the main precept he will later preach – the middle way. During the self-mortification period he is shown as a skeleton emphasizing the immense austerities he endured. At last the future Buddha settled in his meditation under the fig tree and took a firm resolution not to stir until he achieved enlightenment. Yet the forces of evil and deception headed by Mara suspected their immanent loss of power and repeatedly attacked the resolute monk in a desperate attempt to dissuade him from his course. A number of variations of temptation and attack followed the encounter with Mara, and these were often depicted in the arts. Mara sent his army and his daughters to distract and frighten the Bodhisattva, but none of his attempts dissuaded him. After several attempts by enticement and threat failed, Mara demanded proof of authority, but in this final challenge he inadvertently hastened the inevitable. The Buddha called the earth to witness, the hand gesture which became the paramount symbol of enlightenment, known as the bhumisparsa mudra, thereby proclaiming his ultimate victory over the sensible, changing and impermanent world. The bliss of nirvana captivated the sage as he became privy to a profound vision of the universe permeated by perfect wisdom through which he understood the cycle of karma, the cause of suffering and he was able to clearly see the path to detachment and ultimate release from the cycle of existence. After enlightenment, the Buddha decided to share his new found knowledge and during the first sermon, known as the sermon in Deer Park, he set the wheel of law in motion which is represented through the gesture known as dharmacakra mudra and with the wheel, which became the paramount symbol for the 1st sermon and for the new moral order it revealed, set between two attentive deer. The Buddha began by explaining to the ascetics his

reasons for giving up the extremes and then he proceeded to explain the existence of suffering and its roots, expounding on the idea that the complete extinction of desire and separation from worldly considerations will lead to the extinction of suffering. The way to achieve this abolition of suffering is through the Noble eightfold Path, namely – Right views, the Right Aspirations, the Right Speech, the Right Conduct, the Right Livelihood, the Right Effort, the Right Mindfulness, and the Right Meditation. Thus the triad of the three jewels – the Buddha, the Dharma (wheel of law) and the Shanga – community of monks was founded. These three refuges are still the basis of inclusion in the Buddhist community. Characteristic features that clearly distinguish the Buddha are the snail hair, the top knot – ushnisha, the plain robe, the three lines of flesh on the neck and the elongated ears. The serenity of the figure and the smoothness of the work coupled with the full lotus asana seated on the lotus flower became the classical figurative representations of the 1st sermon and were exported throughout Asian lands. This expression of ‘transcendental passivity’ remains perhaps the most prevalent symbol of the Buddha and the hope he inspires. Other episodes of the Buddha’s life soon followed the sermon, including more legendary and miraculous events exemplifying the proof of glory he had achieved. Among such episodes one finds the descent from Tavatimsa heaven, the multiplication of images and the taming of the mad elephant Nalagiri. The final act in the drama of the Buddha was his Final Decease often known as Parinirvana. Having taught for over 40 years the Buddha felt the end near and chose to go to Kusinagara, near the present village of Kasia, to the Sala Grove of the Mallas, where the great sage lay down for his final rest and last journey into Nirvana, having reminded his disciples of their sole responsibility to carry on the doctrine and seek their own enlightenment. His ascent was also miraculous, and the customary cremation self-ignited while his relics, which included the bones and the begging bowl, basin and broom, along with the miraculously preserved first and last shrouds were duly divided and distributed to numerous sites.

Bibliography

The above information was synthesized from the following sources:

Beckert Heinz and **Gombrich** Robert (eds.), The World of Buddhism, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984)

Beckwith John, Early Christian and Byzantine Art, (Yale University Press – Penguin Books Ltd., 1970)

Coomaraswamy, Traditional Art and Symbolism, (Princeton University Press, 1977)
Craven Roy, Indian Art, (World of Art, Thames and Hudson, 1997)
Dehejia Vidya, Indian Art, (Phaidon Press, 1997)
Foucher A, The Life of the Buddha According to the Ancient Texts and Monuments of India, India: Munshiram Manoharial Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2003
Lowden John, Early Christian and Byzantine Art, (Phaidon Press, 1997)
Thomas Edward, The Life of Buddha as Legend and History, Dover Books 2000 reprint from 1949
Tradigo Alfredo, Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2004)
White John, Art and Architecture in Italy 1250-1400, Yale University Press – Penguin Books Ltd, 1966