

Maintaining Buddhist Civilizations on the Silk Road: the Role of Uddésaka Visuals

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This paper traces Buddhist art or iconic visuals along the Silk Road. I use the term ‘Uddésaka’ visuals to explore their role in maintaining the Buddhist citadels and the resultant contributions to the civilisations they fostered from the Kushana Empire to China, Japan and Korea. For example, peaceful international relations and economic exchanges between these nation states helped the growth of these Buddhist bastions contributing to national harmony. The monastic led foundations were patronized by national hierarchies which resulted in a repertoire of personnel adorning the visuals in addition to the Buddha, his disciples and Bodhisattvas. The leadership and patronage of these personnel in maintaining the civilizations are under researched and underestimated by debates on Mahayana and Hinayana streams. Nevertheless, the spread of the Buddhavachana from Jaumbudveepa to the East integrates with striking similarities across the visuals irrespective of the stream of Buddhist discourse. The essence of Buddhist consciousness that took root across these nations in the east is evident in those Uddésaka visuals. The Silla Kingdom of Korea, the Magao, Thousand Buddha and Longman Grottoes of China, the Karla, Kanheri, Bhaja Ajanta and Ellora Caves are great examples. Sri Lanka was a pivotal partner in the endeavour of transferring Buddhist knowledge through art form. The Bulguksa temple containing the Seokguram Grotto in the Silla Kingdom South Korea is exceptional in its resemblance to the Samadhi Buddha of Anuradhapura Kingdom Sri Lanka. The Karla and other caves in Maharashtra, India resemble the complexes in Dunhuang China. The Nelum pethi, Palapethi and the Liyawela designs said to be indigenous to Sri Lankan art inspired by Buddhism are found in the caves in China. However, these historical artefacts and visuals provide only a glimpse of the task and role played by these Buddhist sanctuaries. The descriptive and heritage value in touristic terms are insufficient to understand the lessons from these bygone civilizations and their Uddésaka visuals. This paper tries to uncover the lessons and the messages that lie beyond those visuals for the greater good of humanity in this day and age of violence across the globe.

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