

Exploring an integrated approach to re-assess and authenticate museum documentation: Case study of the Gandhara Collection of Indian Museum, Kolkata.

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ABSTRACT

The paper emphasizes the need to create a documentation platform, which enables convergence of information between museum collections and archival materials with the help of art historical insights. The study is on the catalogue documentation of selected schist sculptures in the Indian Museum, which belong to Gandhara region (present day Pakistan), and were excavated by British colonized India. The findings are presently shared amongst the museums of Pakistan, India and United Kingdom. The paper co-refers to the materials available from the online gallery of The British Library, reports of Archaeological Survey of India, research findings of scholars and other museum collections. The information available through these diverse sources sometimes validates the catalogue data and sometimes questions it. The paper explores the merit of a comprehensive digitization for the likes of the Gandhara collection. It also focuses on the need to create a platform within a museum, which encourages scholarly participation between diverse disciplines, and thus improves the quality of its documentation.

Introduction

In this case study, a section of the catalogue documentation of the Gandhara collection of Indian Museum is re-assessed with the help of other archival materials.¹ The collection, dated 2nd century C.E, consists of schist sculptures recovered from ruins of the Buddhist stupas in Gandhara, a historical region in North West Pakistan.

Indian Museum was the earliest museum in the Subcontinent, which was founded in 1814 as the Oriental Museum of the Asiatic Society. The Museum has the largest collection of Gandhara Art in India. It has 1602 objects out of which 75 are displayed in the Gandhara Gallery. The collection is also unique in its quality, since it has been acquired only from the original findings from excavations and explorations of Buddhist Stupas during the time period between 1848 -1896. Since these discoveries were made at the time of British colonized India, the artifacts were shared amongst the museums of Pakistan, India and United Kingdom. The Museum also has few specimens received in 1922-23 as a loan from the Archaeological Survey of India. There has been no acquisition for the collection post this period. The present collection is catalogued in a comprehensive hand list prepared by Dr. Anasua Sengupta and Dr. Dibakar Das in 1991². John Anderson prepared the earliest catalogue, in 1883.³ Subsequently, two more catalogues were published: one in 1911 by Theodore Bloch⁴, and the other in 1936 by N.G Majumdar.⁵

¹ The findings in this paper is a part of my M.A dissertation on relief sculptures from Indian Museum's Gandhara collection under the supervision of Prof. (Dr.) Anupa Pande, Head, Department of History of Art and Dean, National Museum Institute, New Delhi.

² Anasua Sengupta and Dibakar Das, *Gandhara Holdings in the Indian Museum (A Handlist)*, 1991.

³ John Anderson, *Catalogue and Handbook of the Archaeological Collections in the Indian Museum*, 1883

⁴ Theodore Bloch, *Supplementary Catalogue of the Archaeological Collection of the Indian Museum*, 1911

⁵ N.G Majumdar, *A Guide to the Sculptures in the Indian Museum Part I*, 1936

Currently close to 900 objects are listed with a known provenance. I chose the objects from three regions: Loriyan Tangai, Jamalgarhi and Yusufzai area. The research integrated materials from the following sources: online gallery of The British Library, reports of Archaeological Survey of India, Lahore Museum collection, Hirayama collection of Tokyo and research findings of other scholars in the field.

Authentication of catalogue data through co-referencing

The archival photographs of the online gallery of The British Library were an invaluable source of co-referencing during my research. Provenances of a large number of objects could be authenticated through these photographs, taken during the time of the original excavation. The online gallery has about 160 photographs related to the scope of my study.

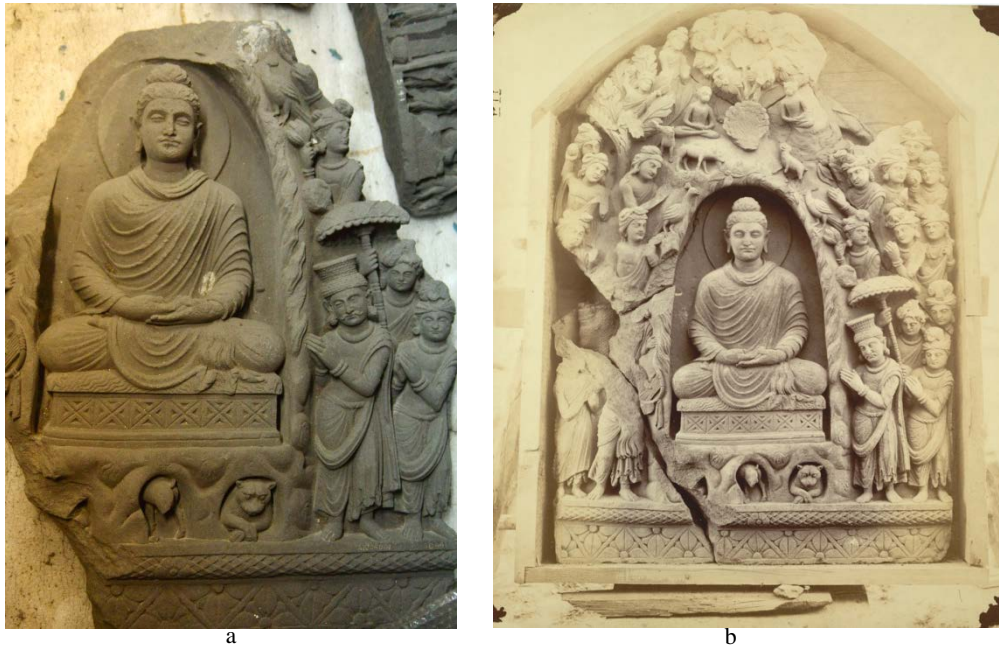
The photographs taken *in situ* helped in the identification of a large number of statues and relief sculptures. They also helped in piecing together several architectural fragments, which were originally found at the same place but are presently dispersed in the museum collection.



Pl.1: Sculptured architectural fragments from upper part of a stupa in Loriyan Tangai, Archival photograph from the online gallery of The British Library, Photographed by Alexander Caddy, 1896, Accessed on August 1, 2015 from: <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/>

Case in point is the archival photograph in *Pl.1* from the online gallery of The British Library, which shows the fragments of a richly carved archway that was found in a Buddhist stupa in Loriyan Tangai. The central panel depicting the story of *Naga*

*Apalāla's submission to Buddha*⁶ is now displayed as a stand-alone piece in the Gandhara Gallery of Indian Museum, while the flanking segments showing devotees are kept separately in the reserve collection. The photograph here helps us in visually reconstructing this beautiful archway and gives us vital information about its sculptural program. The other example of virtual reconstruction is the beautiful Indo-Corinthian capital from Jamalgarhi (Acc. No. G177/ A23490) with Buddha in the centre.



Pl.2: (a) *Indra's visit to Indrasala Cave*, Schist Relief, Acc.No. 5099, Lorian Tangai, Indian Museum. (b) Archival photograph of the same from the online gallery of The British Library showing the complete panel, Photographed by Alexander Caddy, 1896, Accessed on August 1, 2015, from: <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/>

Other than authenticating the catalogue data, these photographs often provided information, which are important for art historical study. In *Pl.2a* we see a fragmented relief from the Museum's reserve collection, *Indra's visit to Indrasala cave*⁷, from Lorian Tangai. The original photograph taken by Alexander Caddy in 1896 shows the entire panel, thus revealing the lost figure of *Panchasikhā* with a harp and the beautiful depiction of nature and the animals who are mirroring Buddha's meditative pose.

Further integration of information was made possible with the reports Archaeological Survey of India. The ASI Report of 1872-73 by Alexander Cunningham⁸ gave a detailed description of his excavation of the Buddhist Stupa at Jamalgarhi site and the sculptures found there. This data could be co-referred

⁶ According to Buddhist legend, *Naga Apalāla* was the guardian of Swat or Suvastu River in the mountaneous terrain of Gandhara. He was angered by the inhabitants of the valley and began flooding the crops and destroying all the properties. Finally Buddha came to rescue. His attendant *Vajrapāni* struck the mountainside with a heavy blow and terrified *Apalāla* who then submitted to Buddha.

⁷ According to Buddhist legend, while Buddha meditated in the *Indrasala* cave in the mountain in Magadha, flames emanated from his body. He was unaware that *Indra* had visited him. *Indra's* arrival was then announced by his harpist *Panchasikhā*.

⁸ Alexander Cunningham, *ASI Report for the Year 1872-73 Vol.V*, 46-52, p 202

to the archival photographs of the British Library taken by James Craddock in 1880. *Pl.3a* shows one such collection of reliefs, the reference of which is in Cunningham’s report in *Pl.3b*. The reliefs in the second row from the top are in the British Museum and the two flanking panels in the next row, marked as “R44” in the photograph (matching with the ASI report) are in the Indian Museum.



a

202		
ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT, 1872-75.		
RELIGIOUS SCENES—contd.		
No.	Size.	Remarks.
E. 39	Inches.	Buddha with four attendants.
40	—	A long undulated garland carried in procession.
41	—	From Kharkai : Several trumpeters.
42	—	A long undulated garland carried in procession.
43	—	Ditto ditto with dancing figures.
44	—	Two sitting and two standing Buddhas in one frieze.
45	—	Two pieces of procession of undulated garland.
46	—	Several pieces of frieze.
47	—	Two panels with Buddha and followers.
48	—	Four groups, with Buddha between pilasters.
49	—	Ditto ditto ditto.

b

Pl.3 (a) Group of sculptured panels from Jamalgarhi, Archival photograph from the online gallery of The British Library, Photographed by James Craddock in 1880, Accessed on August 1, 2015 from: <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/>. (b) The corresponding descriptions of the panels from Cunningham’s report on Jamalgarhi, ASI Report, 1872-73, Vol.V, p202.

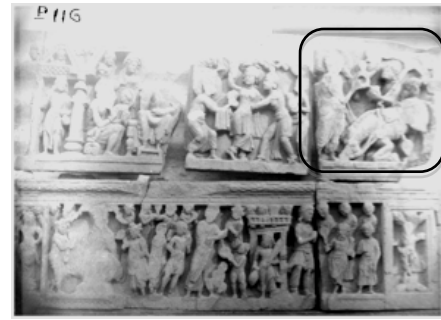
Retrieval of lost information from archival materials

The archival photographs also helped in providing information, which is otherwise lost in the museum documentation. 700 artifacts from the Gandhara collection were unnumbered objects. Hence their provenance could not be ascertained and they were listed as “Provenance Unknown”. With the help of the photographs I could trace the provenance of the relief, *Farewell to Chandaka*⁹ (*Pl.4a*) from the Gandhara Gallery, to Loriyan Tangai. The relief, *The Birth of Buddha*, which was listed under a much wider Yusufzai area, could also be traced to the specific site of Sanghao Nullah.

⁹ *Chandaka* was the charioteer of Buddha when he was leading the royal life as Prince *Siddhārtha*



a



b

Pl.4. (a) *Farewell to Chandaka*, Schist relief, Acc. No.GD20, Unknown Find Spot, Gandhara Gallery, Indian Museum (b) Archival photograph of the same from the online gallery of The British Library, from excavation findings of Loriyan Tangai, Photographed by Alexander Caddy in 1896, Accessed on August 1, 2015 from: <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/>

Integration of Art Historical Research

An important finding of the study was that data from archives, when integrated with research reports of scholars, would often question the validity of the catalogue information. The case in point was a group of objects, which were listed under the site of Loriyan Tangai but showed a wide variation in styles. Findings from an ongoing research conducted by eminent Gandhara scholar Dr Pia Brancaccio¹⁰ threw some light on this. Her study was on a previously unknown collection of Gandhara objects excavated from Swat Valley, which was discovered in the Political House at Malakand, Pakistan. The archival photographs found in the residence-contained photographs of some objects, which are now listed under Loriyan Tangai collection in the Indian Museum. This further strengthens the notion that the objects in question might have come from the same region, i.e. Swat Valley, but not necessarily from the same site, i.e. Loriyan Tangai. This definitely leads to the requirement of further research in this area to ascertain the correct find spots of the objects in question. Therefore, it can be argued that a mere integration of archival materials will not be sufficient unless the information is not validated by art historical research.

Conclusion

¹⁰ With reference to the paper, *The Collection of Gandharan Art in the Malakand Political Agents Residence* presented by Dr Pia Brancaccio in *The International Workshop on Making of Museum Collections, with special reference to Gandhara*, organized by LMU University Munich in collaboration with NMI, New Delhi.

As a scholar in the field of Art History, based on this case study, I would like to draw a wish list, which would greatly benefit any research work on heritage collections in the likes of Gandhara.

Firstly, the digitization of all museum objects along with photographic documentation is essential, especially for reserve collections. Secondly, for a collection like Gandhara, where objects are now dispersed all across the world, digitization needs to be standardized across all museums. Thirdly, through technology integration, a common platform need to be created which would link the material of archives and libraries to the related objects held in the museum collections. Fourthly, this platform should be a dynamic one, which would have digitized versions of research publications, allow and encourage scholarly participation and create forums which are open for discussions.

Very often, an unsteady political climate does not allow research scholars an easy access to the sites across boundaries. An interactive virtual platform, enriched with research worthy material would go a long way in bridging this geographical gap. There are initiatives today like *Catalog of Gandhari Texts*¹¹, which create a virtual collection of manuscripts and support the work of archaeologist and art historians alike. Technology today is advanced enough to create virtual museums as repositories of objects from all over the world. Lost architectural heritages, like the 2000 year old Buddhist stupas of Gandhara can be virtually rebuilt and enjoyed by the public and the scholars alike.

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¹¹ Dr Stefan Baums and Andrew Glass (ed.), *Catalog of Gandhari Texts*, (<http://gandhari.org/catalog>)

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