

Art and Architecture : The Near East and Central Asia

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From the seventh century B.C. the legacy of the Assyrian Empire was still felt throughout the Near East. The 'imperial' style of large stone sculptures, wall paintings and statues passed from the Assyrians to the Persians, as can be seen in the remains of Persepolis in contemporary Fars province of Iran. Here the power and wealth of the Achaemenid Empire is communicated to an observer by the sculptured rows of tribute bearers to the court of the king of kings. This 'imperial' style influenced the art of Maurya India and had echoes in Central Asia, as we can see for example in textiles from nomadic burials in Pazyryk in Siberia as well as smaller objects made of gold, wood or clay. Egyptian art, on the other hand, had much less influence abroad for Egyptian influence was directed to the south, up the Nile River more than in neighboring Asia.

Achaemenid art, as far as we know, did not displace local styles or techniques, but much as the imperial government it too was limited to the royal court and the aristocracy which copied the court. At the same time as the Achaemenid Empire in the Near East we find on the steppes of Central Asia, as well as in the oasis states of both west and east Turkestan, the continuance of an older 'animal' style, especially in metal objects such as horse trappings, belt buckles and weapons, as well as in gold jewelry. Contorted shapes of fantastic animals characterize the 'animal' style of the Iranian nomads called Sakas by the Persians and Scythians by the Greeks. This general style, albeit with variations such as the later Sarmatian style of jewels inlaid in gold or silver objects, continued almost to the seventh century of our era. The early art of the Scythians-Sakas underwent modifications under the Sarmatians, but the same spirit of nomadic art is discernible in both.

In eastern Central Asia, however, in addition to the nomadic style Chinese culture was very influential, as we learn from many Chinese textiles, bronze mirrors and other objects found in graves, especially those of nomadic chieftains. Apparently there was little if any synthesis between Chinese and other arts, as there had been in western Central Asia with Near Eastern, Iranian and Hellenistic mixtures. In the oases of Xinjiang in the early part of the first millennium B. C. we do not find distinctive local styles of art, although this may be because of the

paucity of archaeological work. Also until the Han dynasty of China and the Greco-Bactrians in the west Xinjiang had little contact with east and west. Chinese influences were the earliest foreign contacts of the oases states with the outside followed by trading relations with India. It is only in the western part of Central Asia, where after the conquests of Alexander of Macedonia Greek artistic canons begin to influence local artistic patterns, that we can trace important changes in the arts. One must always remember, however, that in the ancient Near East and Central Asia very few individual artists or craftsmen are known, and the distinction between handicrafts, decoration and artistic objects is blurred. Arts and crafts seem to be facets of the same milieu. Also art in Iran and Central Asia throughout history was predominantly decorative and representational, especially in religious objects or buildings. Before the rise of universal religions, however, it is difficult to differentiate between ritual objects and artistic representations of a particular religion, while the symbolism of most objects associated with ancient religious beliefs usually escapes us. This is illustrated by many art objects, for example silver bowls and ewers which have a variety of subjects depicted on them. Fortunately many have inscriptions and thus can be identified as Sogdian, Choresmian, Bactrian, Parthian or Sasanian. The earlier bowls and flasks (pre-Christian era) frequently had on them copies of Classical Greek subjects, such as representations of Herakles or Dionysius with motifs associated with these deities. Later religious subjects, such as a female deity Nanai seated on a lion, are found on Choresmian and Sogdian bowls. Again whether these were ritual objects or used for drinking, or simply aesthetic objects to be observed, is uncertain.

In Central Asia the introduction of Indian motifs, and even religious symbols like the trident of Shiva with three faces, indicates the importance of southern influences on the art of Central Asia, parallel to the strong Hellenistic sway in many realms. One may observe both variety and eclecticism in the arts of early Central Asia where secular and religious art frequently cannot be distinguished. All of this changes by the third century of our era when the primary identity of a person is not determined by what language he speaks, nor to which ruler he owes allegiance, but only of which religion is he an adherent. The symbolisms of the universal religions seem to absorb all artistic creations, at least in what has survived. Buddhist art is very distinctive with the early wheel of ²dharma ³ replaced by figures of the Buddha dominating that art. By the turn of the millennium Hellenistic influenced Buddhist art, named after Gandhara in the northwest of the sub-continent of India, had penetrated into Central Asia. Here it was modified by local Iranian influences, especially under the Kushans in the first centuries A.D. So the Buddha figures, with all their accoutrements, came to look like local Iranian nobles in jewel bedecked clothes which can be observed in the wall paintings of Bamiyan in central Afghanistan and in a number of sites in southern Uzbekistan, such as Khalchayan, and in Tajikistan such as Adjina tepe. The same style passed from Bactria to eastern Turkestan, especially in the wall

paintings and clay figures in the oases of Kucha and Turfan. In Bactria, but especially in the oasis states of eastern Turkestan, beautiful wall paintings of scenes from the life of Buddha decorated the walls of caves or monasteries. In Kucha and Turfan Iranian influences are dominant but in Dunhuang, in present Gansu province of China, the influence of Chinese painting is evident. Today these frequently faded wall paintings evoke a sense of wonder at their artistic quality and the great attention paid to detail by the artists, but over a millennium years ago these paintings did more; they inspired awe and reverence in the believer. Buddhist art, as others, changed over time and we should review the forms and motifs which were prevalent or fashionable in the Near East and Central Asia during the thousand and half year period under consideration.

Classical Greek art was realistic, especially in the depiction of the human body, while Near Eastern art was rigid and formal in comparison. The latter was not intended to be 'beautiful' and realistic but to convey a message, such as the power of the ruler or the solemnity of a deity. After the conquests of Alexander both Greek art and Near Eastern art began to change. Idealism began to replace realism, surely influenced by new religions, especially mystical sects, as well as by a tendency to view the world in a pessimistic vein. It is true that both in the Roman Empire and in the East, slavish copies of the works of the classical Greek world were made, indicating a lack of originality and a reverence for the past. The new mood of the times is best seen by the universal style of frontality of human figures in the Parthian period together with an other worldly expression on faces with wide eyes staring at but not seeing the beholder. This is true of Coptic funerary portraits from Egypt, Palmyrene statues and both statues and paintings of the ascetic Sarvastivadin sect of Buddhism which was popular at that same time in Central Asia. It seems that all of these works of art in east and west proclaim the transitoriness of human life and a resigned world view.

In the art of the first centuries both before and after our era there is no aesthetic feeling for the beauty of the human body any more than in the medieval West. This style, if we may so call it, begins to change with the foundation of the Sasanian state in Iran and the economic flourishing of oasis states in both eastern and western Turkestan. In Iran beginning in the third century of our era secular, imperial traditions again come to the fore, while rich merchants in Central Asia commission artists to portray themselves and their activities or frequently a scene from mythology or epic. Strict frontality gives way to greater variety in the portrayal of the human head or body, but no return to Greek realism. Rather we find a fixed and frozen depiction of figures without the ethereal, mystical poses of the preceding centuries. In one realm, that of monetary art, however, there is a visible progression from the superb Greek coins of the Greco-Bactrian rulers and the Seleucids to a degenerate copying of those coins by Parthian and Saka rulers. With the Sasanians, and to a lesser extent the Kushans, the coinage becomes fixed and canonical similar to the art.

This parallels the establishment of orthodoxy in the universal religions when the art, similar to religious doctrines, becomes canonized. This situation continues down to the coming of Islam when great changes occur in the Near East and in Central Asia in art as well as in other realms. The coming of Islam in the western part of Central Asia coincides with the great Chinese influence of the Tang dynasty in the eastern part. Since religion so dominated the lives of people in the Near East and in Central Asia, one may speak of a Buddhist art, a Christian art and an Islamic art but not a Zoroastrian or Manichaean art. Instead, in those two cases the art forms are closely bound to secular art of the period, and one can only speak of Zoroastrian features, such as the depiction of a fire altar in a scene, or white clothed Manichaean *electi* (like priests) in a miniature or on a wall painting. This state of affairs, of course, may reflect the failure on the part of the Zoroastrians to develop a distinctive iconography as the other religions, or more likely it is the result of the destruction of the symbols and art of the Manichaeans and Zoroastrians by the followers of the dominant religions which continued to expand and flourish.

It should be noted that both Achaemenid and Kushan art may be characterized as synthetic or integrated arts since both drew heavily on the past or on neighboring arts to fashion their imperial styles. Both were different from Roman art, for example, since the latter adopted or simply transferred shapes or concepts from the Greeks. We cannot discuss here the subtler questions of what was in the mind of the artist or the beholder, and the meanings given to the creations of the artist other than obvious religious implications.

Architecture also developed different forms in the long period under consideration. In Iran and Central Asia the lack of trees made lumber rare and costly and led to alternate materials for building. From early times mud in the form of sun or oven baked bricks, or in easier pise mud walls, was the dominant material of builders. The use of stone was rare and only served as bases of columns, floors or to strengthen walls. The stonework of the Achaemenids and Seleucids was finely done, but only found in royal or state buildings. Otherwise sun dried bricks or mud was the usual form of building material. About the time of the Kushans in Afghanistan and Central Asia a new style of erecting walls was evolved, what may be called a mixture of rubble and ashlar masonry which is a distinctive sign for archaeologists. This form of masonry spread to Chinese Turkestan as well.

The walls of buildings were covered with plaster or stucco, a hard plaster similar to cement, which may have been developed in Central Asia and spread to the west. Moldings of many forms, such as garlands and flowers, decorated the houses of the aristocracy both in Iran and in Central Asia, while sculptured heads of humans or animals were favored subjects of the Kushans and their successors. Moulds have been found indicating a mass production of small idols

in household devotions, especially in western Central Asia where a local form of Zoroastrianism was the principal religion. In Chinese Central Asia Buddhism soon after the turn of the millennium was dominant, and here too we find many small Buddha or Bodhisattva figures in plaster, frequently employed in religious architecture.

Several architectural features probably originated in Iran or Central Asia in the Parthian period. One was a 'step-vault' or a pointed arch ceiling built of bricks projecting above each other to form a closed top, held by a special, strong cement. Another was the *eyvan* or *ivan*, a vaulted open ended hall, or an open half cupola flanked by two walls as a front facade for a house with a courtyard or garden behind the *eyvan*. This became the characteristic feature of Iranian house architecture down to the present. In Central Asia the usual architectural form of a temple in which was a central cult object, statue or Buddhist *stupa*, around which processions of worshippers marched, had many varieties even in the same religion. All of them vanished with the spread of Islam and its unified mosque form. Although the *eyvan* is pre-Islamic in origin, with modifications it became the standard form of mosque architecture in Islamic times. The architecture of eastern Islamic lands evolved into a definite style with distinctive motifs, as did all of the arts, such that the previous variety or eclectic arts became unified under the all inclusive Islamic faith.

Another distinctive architectural feature of Afghanistan and Central Asia was the roof called ²laternendecke ³ which may be seen cut into the rock in the roofs of Buddhist monastery caves at Bamiyan and Kizil near Kucha in Xinjiang. Originally the roof was made of lumber or logs placed in a series of squares laterally on top of each other and becoming smaller near the top. Obviously such a style of roof building could only arise in an area near or in mountains where large trees would be available for construction. This method of roof construction spread to all of the oasis towns on the routes to China. This roof covering originally may have been restricted to the cells of Buddhist monks but it continued down to the present in general use in the mountain regions of the Hindukush, Pamirs and Tien shan.

Another architectural feature of Iran and Central Asia is more controversial in that its origin is uncertain. The corner squinch or ²muqarnas ³, as it is called in Islamic times, whereby a round dome was placed on a square building, was evolved in pre-Islamic times but after Islam it is found in stalactite formations of great complexity and beauty all over the Islamic world. The introduction of the semicircular arch in building has been attributed to eastern Iran or Central Asia about the second century B.C. Thus, we can see that the contributions of Central Asia to the realm of architecture were many and they spread both east and west.

Ceramics, the basic source material of archaeologists, changed not only in form and decoration but also in techniques in Central Asia. For example, terra cotta pottery and figurines, which in early times were crudely made, under Hellenistic influence in the Kushan period not only became more sophisticated in forms and colors but also techniques of preparation were perfected. Especially interesting is the production of fine terra cottas using a much reduced temperature in kilns, again probably borrowed from Greece. Some pottery forms in Central Asia were copied from leather jugs and wooden trays of nomads.

Another medium of artistic expression in mountainous Central Asia was wood, and the charred carved wooden statues found in Penjikent in Tajikistan, dating from the 5th and 6th centuries of our era, are impressive in their details. Also carved and decorated wooden columns were used to support the roofs in the houses of rich Sogdian and Bactrian merchants. Wood carving was a specialty of the mountain regions of Central Asia, and again the use of carved columns has survived to the present. The style of wood carving in the pre-Islamic period was parallel to the figures and decorations which we see in the wall paintings and in plaster counterparts. The slim waisted nobles with richly decorated clothing and sword hanging from the belt were distinctive to Central Asian art since they are not found in Sasanian Iran, nor, of course, in Chinese paintings or figurines, unless they depicted a Central Asian noble who visited China.

Although Chinese silk with characteristic designs was exported to Central Asia and was much sought after, local textiles, especially wool, also were famous and exported to east and west. One village in the oasis of Bukhara, called Andana, was especially noted for its textile production and this continued into Islamic times when cloths and clothes made of the fabric from Zandana, called Zandanichi, were exported all over the Islamic world. A fragment of the cloth with a Sogdian inscription may be seen in the textile museum of Lyons, France.

We may say that the arts of Central Asia reflected the central geography of the area with influences from China, from India and from the Near East and Greece. In the few centuries before the Islamic expansion into Central Asia the opulent arts reflect the tastes of rich merchants who plied long distance trade routes between China, India, the northern steppes and the Near East. There was a distinctive 'oasis style' reflected in the ornamented clothing and highly decorative styles of painting and sculpture and this reflected the prosperous society of many small oasis states whose wealth was based primarily on luxury trade between the great centers of China, India and the Near East and the steppes. The Islamic caliphate only extended the horizons of Central Asian merchants and for several centuries Central Asia became a great cultural and religious center of learning for the entire Islamic world. That is a later story, but it is based on the past.

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