

REVISITING HOUSEHOLD OBJECTS: THEIR CONTINUITY IN GANDHARA ART

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Abstract

Gandhāra or the ancient Peshawar valley is a blend of diverse cultures through artistic expression, represented in the Stone and stucco sculptures. The representation ranges from common social and domestic activities to the religious and princely phenomenon. On many friezes and relief panels, one may observe the wrestlers, musicians, and dancers. Additionally, the artists carved several religious ideas and beliefs on various relief panels that throw light on their socio-political, socio-economic and religious facets of their civilization. Their daily life activities are carved in such a way that reveals their skill and commitment to their work. Even with the passage of times these activities and objects carved are still practiced for centuries with minor modifications or alterations.

Gandhāra was invaded by many foreign nations. All of them have left their impact on the local traditions and cultures e.g. food, dress, Household objects, Jewellery, Furniture, Music and Sports etc. This paper concentrates on the household objects that carved in the different relief panels of Buddhist art. The influence of past traditions is still clearly visible in present society. Although they have lost their original form, a glimpse of the past can still be easily seen in them. As for instance, in different relief panels, the artists of Gandhāra carved different household objects are carved. The same objects are still in use in Peshawar valley with minor changes like cup, pitcher, Tub etc.

Key words: Gandhāra, Peshawar valley, Household Objects, food, dress, Jewellery, Furniture, relief panels, Music and Sports.

1. Introduction

The material culture of ancient civilizations throws light on the daily customs, values, and aesthetic preferences of their people. A remarkable illustration of this culture is Gandhara Art, a syncretic artistic tradition that flourished in present day Pakistan and Afghanistan between the first century BCE and the fifth century CE. The delicately carved items of everyday life contrast with its imposing depictions of Buddhist, *Jataka* tales. These seemingly everyday items, such as jars, chairs, textiles, mirrors, and kitchenware, are often placed into complex theological or narrative frameworks and are often incorporated in relief panels and sculptures.

Instead of viewing these objects as just artistic topics, this study re-examines them as an important links between the symbolic realm that ancient Gandharan society lived and its actual experiences. By examining how domestic goods were shown and reused over time, this study explores their aesthetic continuity, cultural significance, and potential transformation from useful tools to iconographic elements. It aims to provide light on the nuanced connections between the sacred and the secular through domestic materiality, offering insights into the persistence and development of Gandharan visual expression.

2. Literature Review

Ancient Gandhara present day Peshawar valley

The present Peshawar Valley, sometimes known as Gandhara, is located in the centre of ancient Gandhara (Zwalf 1996:1, Inghot 1957:13). The precise boundaries of the Peshawar

valley remain unclear if it was a distinct state, as the Chinese and some classical historians referred to it as Gandhara (Rehman 2010:17). At the base of Khyber Pass, the Peshawar Valley serves as a gateway to the subcontinent (Dani 1994:15).

Emergence of Buddhism in Gandhara

Pakistan is among the one of the nation having a very rich cultural heritage that has been preserved for humanity since the antiquity. The first evidence of human activity was found in 1939 when the Cambridge and Yale expedition reported discovering pebbles, hand axes, and Abbevillian Acheullean types of stone tools from the Soan valley. But this is not everything. The ancient residents of Meher Garh, the oldest village in South Asia, witnessed the rise and fall of the strong Indus Valley Civilization, as well as the arrival of the Aryans.

During the 6th and 5th centuries B.C.E., religious revolutions occurred globally, with figures like Zoroaster, Confucius, and Pythagoras challenging existing systems. In India, Buddha and the Tirthankaras opposed Brahmanism. Buddhism, founded by Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha) in 563 B.C.E., initially remained limited to regions like Magadha and Benaras. It gained wider popularity after Buddha's death, largely due to Emperor Asoka, who adopted it as the state religion and promoted it following the Kalinga war. Asoka's missionary efforts, including sending the monk Madhyantika to Gandhara in 265 B.C.E., played a crucial role in establishing Buddhism in the region (Khan et al 2005:20, Ali 1998:38 &2003:42).

Gandhara played a major role in spreading Buddhism and its related art and architecture to neighbouring regions. While scholars have generally studied its civilization, the continuity of Gandharan cultural traditions in the present day Peshawar valley now shaped by a different religion and environment remains underexplored. A systematic investigation of Gandharan art reveals that some traditions still present and practised in the region in 21st century. Daily use items such as kitchenware's, clothing, ornaments, furniture, writing tools, musical instruments, and footwear showed strong similarities between ancient and the present Peshawar valley (ancient Gandhara) indicating the long-lasting influence of its civilization. This study explores some household objects which still integral part of the people of day today life of present Peshawar valley.

3. Research Methodology

This study draws upon both archaeological investigations and literary sources to understand the roots and evolution of the selected traditions.

3.1 Archaeological Investigations

Fieldwork will focus on collecting visual and material evidence, including digital photographs and detailed observations of Gandharan art and Buddhist sculptures. These findings will help reveal how such traditions emerged, evolved, and continue to reflect cultural expressions over time.

3.2 Literary Data

Complementing the field study, archival and literary materials—such as reports, manuscripts, maps, and photographs—will be examined to trace historical narratives and cultural continuity. This data will provide valuable insights into how these traditions have been interpreted, preserved, and practiced in modern contexts.

4. Discussion

This section describes selected visual materials from the Gandhara region, including pitchers, mugs, ewers, water tubs, bowls, and hand fans. These artefacts reflect the domestic life, craftsmanship, and aesthetic sense of the Gandharan people. The elegant forms and functional designs of pitchers and ewers reveal advanced pottery skills, while the decorative motifs on mugs and bowls suggest Hellenistic influence blended with local tradition. Objects such as water tubs and hand fans indicate adaptation to daily needs and climate. Remarkably, similar

items are still used in local households today, preserving a tangible link between Gandharan heritage and contemporary life.

i. **Pitchers or Small jars (*Mangy*)**

In Gandhāran art, pitchers have been utilized for sacred rituals. As shown in Siddhartha's bath scene. On Siddhartha, Indra and Brahma are depicted using pitchers to pour water (Cunningham 1875: 201; Marshall 1960: Pl 36; fig 36; Murthy 1977: 77 :Pl.XIX[12], Ali 2008: 59).

Pitchers have a long history dating back to the Neolithic age, when humans first began making pottery (Qazi 1998:10–11). Numerous Indus sites, including *Kot-diji* and Harappa, have yielded a wealth of beautiful and delicate Bronze Age pottery (Kenoyer 1998: 151).

Throughout country, terracotta pots and pitchers are widely used since they are sweeter than contemporary jars and retain the water cool for an extended period of time. It is known as *mangy* in the Peshawar Valley (fig. 1). As a *Duprai* a musical instrument, the pitcher is also essential to indigenous music.

ii. **Mug or Cups**

In Gandhāra art, the mug or cup plays a crucial role in ceremonial and marry-making scenes. Men and women can be seen holding cups or mugs in their hands in the (fig. 22) (Ali et al. 2008: 83-85; Ingholt 1957: 160, fig. 411, 42; Marshall 1960: 34-35, Pl 28, Fig. 44).

In the present Peshawar valley, a number of these varieties are still dominant (fig. 23). These are easily available in marketplaces and are used on a regular basis. Modern Mugs are made of several materials, including metal, plastic, China clay, and terracotta.

iii. **Ewer (*Lota*)**

In the past, Ewer was used just as much as pitchers, mugs, and cups. Viśvantra is using a Ewer to pour water on a Brahma's hands in the relief panel as shown in (figure 24)(Qazi et al. 2008: 44; Marshall 1909: PlXVIII(e); Ingholt 1957: 4, Pl. 6; Sehrai 1991: 21, pl 5; Zwalf 1996: 142, Pl. 137).

In Pashtun society as a whole, hand washing is still a customary gesture of hospitality. As a sign of respect, everyone is asked to wash their hands before a meal, especially the guests. Locally, Ewer is known as *Koza* or *Lota* (fig. 25). It is made of different materials, but the most popular ones are metal and plastic, as well as terracotta, which are currently being replaced by newer materials. It is also a part of the ablution focused bathroom accessories. The young ones are supposed to pour water on elder's hands

iv. **Water Tub**

Water tub has been seen in the birth scene of *Kanthaka* and *Chandaka* (fig. 26). The mother is holding her baby *Chandaka* in the water tub for bathing (Ali et al 2008: 57; Sehrai 1991: 24, Pl. 9).

v. In modern society, a tub is a abundant household item, particularly for bathing children. Once, terracotta was used to make these tubs. But German silver and copper are also used. Plastic tubs are taking the place of other varieties because they are more affordable and portable (fig. 27).

vi. **Bowl**

In the Gandhāran panels, the bowl is depicted in the food and offering scenes. According to Marshall (1951: pl. 221) and Zwalf (1996), the panel (fig. 28) depicts Buddha receiving four bowls from the gods, which he combined into one and used

until his death. The same bowl is in use made up of different materials like terracotta, glass, plastic, metallic and stone (fig. 29).

vii. Hand Fan (*Babozay*)

In the mentioned relief panel (fig. 30) the monks are shown preparing seat for the Buddha. One of the monks is hold a hand fan (Qazi *et al* 2008:128, Sehrai 1991:40: Pl 36).

The hand fan locally known as *babozay* is still used for air regulation in the rural as well as in the urban areas during the power breakdown in the hot weather (fig. 31). Hand fan also used by the chefs in Bar-B-Que and silver smiths also use it to keep the fire burning in furnace.

5. Conclusion

The material culture of Gandhara, as reflected through everyday objects such as pitchers, mugs, Ewers, bowls, water tubs, and hand fans, reveals a unique synthesis of functional utility and symbolic meaning. These items, while embedded in religious and ceremonial contexts within Gandharan art, also provide valuable insights into the daily lives of the people. Their depiction in sacred narratives suggests that the boundary between the sacred and the secular in Gandhara was fluid, with domestic objects being elevated to symbols of spiritual and aesthetic significance. This interplay between ordinary life and religious expression reflects a culture that found profound meaning in everyday experiences, seamlessly integrating the spiritual with the material world.

Moreover, the continued use of these objects in the daily lives of people in the modern Peshawar Valley highlights the long lasting legacy of Gandharan culture. Despite centuries of religious and political change, many traditional tools and practices have continued either in their original form or modified with slight change in their function, or in both. The ongoing use of *mangy*, *lota*, and *babozay* in local households highlights a remarkable cultural resilience and a living connection to the region's historical past. By re visiting these items not merely as relics, but as active symbols of continuity, this study offers deeper insight into how ancient civilizations continue to shape modern identities and traditions in subtle yet meaningful ways.

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Figure 1. Bathing Scene (Peshawar Museum)



Figure 2. Modern Potters designs of pitcher



Figure 3. An Ewer can be seen in the above panel (Visvantra Jataka) (Peshawar Museum)



Figure 4. Modern *koza* and *lota*

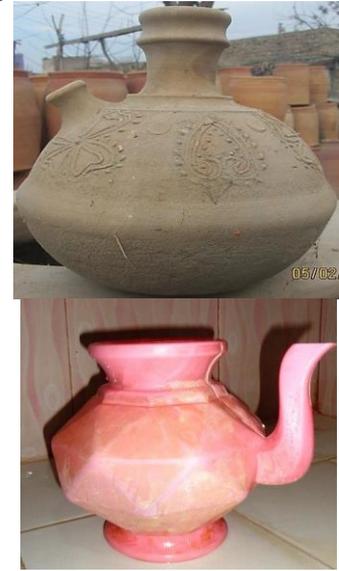


Figure 5. Marry-making scene(Peshawar Museum)



Figure 6. Modern Mugs



Figure 7. Offering of Bowls (Peshawar Museum)



Figure 8. Modern Bowl



Figure 9. Kanthaka is being given bath in a tub (Peshawar Museum)

Figure 10: Modern Tub



Figure 111. Man holding a hand fan in the preparation for first sermon (Peshawar Museum)



Figure 12. Modren Hand fan

