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Fig. 1
Milan, Civic Archaeological
Museum, Bodhisattva statue,
inv. A o.9.2921.

Abstract

The Civic Archaeological Museum of Milan holds a small but remarkable collection of Gandharan Art, acquired by the former Director Ermanno Arslan, between the 70s and the 90s of the 20th century. Archaeological method, that is to say contextualization, must apply also to objects without provenance. Cultural diversity is the starting point to understand/detect relations, connections, mutual interferences between cultures. Through museum exhibitions, we can transmit the notion that archaeological objects, more than being works of art to be admired for their beauty, are a cluster of various information regarding the ancient culture to which they belong.

The Civic Archaeological Museum of Milan holds a small but remarkable collection of Gandharan Art, acquired by the former Director Ermanno Arslan, between the 70s and the 90s of the 20th century.

The collection, which is composed of less than 40 pieces from the antiquarian market, were selected in order to give an insight into this artistic production, mostly unknown to the museum's general public.

At the time of acquisition, Milan was an important market for Oriental art and the purpose was to assign to public view objects which were about to enter private collections. The latter prevailed due to the ancient and ongoing pillage of Gandharan art (on this topic see Ali, Coningham 1998).

Though questionable, the acquisition of this collection offers the museum the possibility to let visitors discover such an important artistic production, as well as to stress the importance of context, both in the strict and in a broader sense, in order to understand these ancient works.

These issues – the importance of context and how the loss of it undermines the identity of artifacts without provenance – are among the most relevant issues that an archaeological museum must address.

Furthermore, Gandharan art has long suffered from being perceived as Buddhist art dressed in Hellenistic forms¹. This allure has determined its success in Europe but has also undermined its comprehension. Formal qualities, being a straightforward means for museum visitors to interpret

¹ Filigenzi 2012b, and in press.



Fig. 2a, 2b
Milan, Civic Archaeological
Museum, Pilaster Capital,
inv. A 990.05.01.



objects, can be misleading if not correctly explained. The museum must function as a mediator, fostering curiosity but also providing insights that underline the importance of scientific knowledge for the interpretation of its collections.

Exhibition guidelines

The museum exhibition² is accompanied by panels with illustrations on the geographical, historical, religious and social contexts of Gandharan art. Graphical reconstructions help contextualize the scattered pieces, while texts give visitors insights into Buddhism, long distance trade routes and the discovery of Gandharan art.

Once properly framed in its historical and religious context Gandharan art appears less a mere branch of Hellenized East and more a phenomenon in its own right, that cannot be read and understood out of its local context. Gandharan art follows its own specialized codes that vary in time and space. Though archaeological contexts are still very few in regard to the collections around the world, recent research has prompted new approaches and provides some significant viewpoints. Reconnected to its own cultural universe Gandhara offers a significant and illuminating example of how a cultural entity develops through interactions with other cultures.

Art is a conventionalized system of communication that depends on context and we must rethink our way of looking at objects. Archaeological method, that is to say contextualization, must apply also to objects without provenance. Cultural diversity is the starting point to understand/detect relations, connections, mutual interferences.

Through museum exhibitions, we can transmit the notion that archaeological objects, more than being works of art to be admired for their beauty,

² Due to lack of display space, some objects are in the store-rooms.



Fig. 3
Milan, Civic Archaeological
Museum, Relief,
inv. A 0.9.18499.

are a cluster of various information regarding the ancient culture to which they belong; they bear information about religion, society, economy, because of their being, in antiquity, the most powerful media of communication.

The Gandharan Collection of Milan ranges from statues to reliefs and architectural elements (a *nāgadanta* – *stūpa* peg –, a small capital from an engaged pilaster, a dividing element with an engaged pilaster). It also includes five reliquaries and an inscribed terracotta jar. Stucco and clay production is represented by the head of a Buddha and other figures belonging to reliefs and scenes once applied to walls.

Some items have been cited in papers and books³; none of them have ownership history – as far as I can infer from archival documents – except the name of the last dealer/owner. Some fragments are allegedly said to come from Swāt (Provenzali 2005, nn. 4, 19) or from Hadda/Nagarahara (Provenzali 2005, nn. 30-31)⁴; in some cases the type of schist (green schist) points to Swat as the place of provenance⁵ (Provenzali 2005, nn. 22 - Fig. 2a-b, 23). This provenance can also be tentatively hypothesized for other items that display similarities in material or iconography with items from Swāt (Provenzali 2005, n. 12 - Fig. 3).

³ Besides the bibliography cited in Verardi 1991, Provenzali 2000 and 2005 see Taddei 1991, p. 317, n. 5 (Civic Archaeological Museum, Inv. N. A 0.9.18496; Filigenzi 2012a, fig.13 (Civic Archaeological Museum, Inv. N. A 0.9.18497).

⁴ Reported in the acquisitions register.

⁵ A gandharan-corinthian capital and the dividing element (the latter in talcoso schist).

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Fig. 4
Milan, Civic Archaeological
Museum, Bodhisattva
Head with inscription,
inv. A 0.9.18496.

Lacking their archaeological context and all related data, the items must be scrutinized from various perspectives in order to gather as much information as possible.

Morphological analysis, material, masons tool marks, combined with iconographic and stylistic analysis can give us useful data to link the items in the collection to others whose provenance is known, and to eventually detect fakes.

When dealing with out-of-context items, careful scrutiny is the only feasible approach. It can be very discouraging as it raises more doubts than it provides certainties; often it clashes with the singularity of an object. We can only commit ourselves to observe every item from different points of view, without forgetting that any assumption must be thoroughly examined.

Diagnostic analysis such as that conducted by Pannuzi, Talarico, Guida, Rosa (in this issue) is a useful means to gain information about objects, that we hope will also be useful to contextualize them.

In this brief contribution we can only outline some issues regarding the Milan collection.

Detecting recent modifications

Coming from the antiquarian market, reliefs and statues are liable to have been modified in order to meet the taste of the collector⁶.

The Bodhisattva head with inscription on the halo (Fig. 4, schist, H.30 cm, Length.24, Provenzali 2005, n.4) is puzzling if one observes the treatment of the eye. The surface of the concave halo has not been polished notwithstanding the inscription, while the face of the bodhisattva is in very good condition. It could be a fake, but the inscription is deemed to be authentic.

Some stucco figures bear traces of restoration aimed at hiding fractures and junctions (see for example Provenzali 2005, nn. 30-31). I devoted an article to the biggest reliquary of the collection, a “pastiche” composed from different fragments.

A Bodhisattva statue (Inv. N. A 0.9.2921, Provenzali 2005, n.5) shows holes, made in recent times, to fix to it other pieces (Fig. 1).

Research perspectives

The advancement of Gandharan studies linked to the publication of archaeological reports and to archaeological investigations is bringing new perspectives to the study of the collection⁷.

Stucco and clay statues need to be studied for their materials and moulding/modeling technique and their relation to the archaeological records (see for example Filigenzi 2010).

A morphological analysis that takes into account mortises, tenons, masons and tool marks can give us clues regarding the possible original location of objects.

⁶ See for example Provenzali 2005, nn.30-31. Heads seems to have been rejoined (or simply attached) to another part/to the body.

⁷ See Faccenna 1980-1981;1993 and 1995, Olivieri-Filigenzi 2018.



We hope that, being studied and exhibited in a public museum, these items which are stuck in show-cases so far from home, will regain as much as possible of their identity.

Surely they have much to teach us about the way we should perceive cross-cultural relationships in the ancient as in the contemporary world.



Fig. 5a, 5b
Milan, Civic Archaeological
Museum, Relief,
inv.A 0.9.18498.

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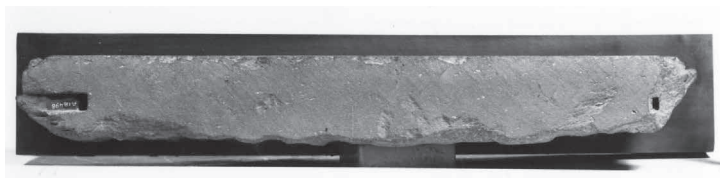
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