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Empirical Aesthetics and the History of Buddhist Art

Theoretical Insights from Recent Reflections on the "Origin" of the Buddha Image

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Abstract This article examines, revises and reconciles divergent conceptions of aesthetic experience and of aesthetics articulated in recent art-historical scholarship on Buddhist arts, and particularly on the "origin" of the Buddha image. It begins with a critical analysis of an Indologist's conceptualization of "Buddhist aesthetics," and uses it as a point of departure to propose an empirical account of aesthetic experience that is consistent with Buddhist teachings. Based on this parameter, the article then evaluates the role aesthetic theories play within the relevant art-historical discourse and shows therein how aesthetics is reduced to art theories. As this article observes, such reduction results from efforts to formulate a model for the "origin" of the Buddha image. The debates surrounding this "origin" issue demonstrate the shared problem of communication that underlies both aesthetics and art history. The article proposes that scientifically informed research into the nature of aesthetic experience can provide a productive reconciliatory framework for these debates.

Keywords Aesthetic Experience, Valence, Buddhist Image, Gandhāran Art, Origin

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1. Introduction

This article seeks to examine, revise, and reconcile some divergent conceptions of aesthetic experience and of aesthetics articulated in recent art-historical scholarship on Buddhist art, with special attention to studies on the "origin" of the Buddha image. The inquiries on the origin, centered on the oldest known Buddhist artifacts from ancient Indian subcontinental regions, seem to operate on similar assumptions and views about what aesthetics ought to be, but introduce contrasting aesthetic theories in their art-historical interpretations and differing views on what aesthetic experience is. In this body of scholarship, aesthetic theories are deployed to establish a critical context without a correspondingly explicit account of aesthetic experience. Overall, the term "aesthetic" continues to be employed so broadly as to encompass all feelings and thoughts generated through subjective cognitive construction. As will be shown below, this usage often leads to the neglect of distinctions between the aesthetic and the artistic, allowing each term to function ambiguously in place of the other.

It may therefore be fruitful to contribute to the foregoing discussions by attempting to formulate a viable conceptualization of the nature of aesthetic experience. In pursuing this aim, the paper draws upon relevant findings in cognitive neuroscience and naturalistic philosophy to describe the varied usages of "aesthetic" and "aesthetics" and to evaluate the adequacy of aesthetic theories implicated therein. As a starting point, I take an Indologist's disenfranchising and reductive account of aesthetics in Buddhist cultures, using it to draw a naturalized conception of aesthetic experience that is closely consonant with Buddhist teachings and cultural praxis. Based on this initial argument, similar patterns of reduction identified in

other art-historical studies on Buddhist artifacts will be analyzed. These reductive approaches to aesthetics are implicated in a range of problems in the scholarship: aesthetic prejudices embedded in authorship, challenges to the empirical study of aesthetic experience, and the frequently voiced claim that European aesthetic theories are inadequate for the interpretation of Buddhist artistic traditions.

It is also observed that these differences in notion arise from the selective use of aesthetic theories by art-historians as conclusions to their respective analyses. This is shown in their interpretations of the earliest known Buddhist artifacts in ways that are consistent with the learnings from Buddhist teachings. In this discourse, aesthetics is, more often than not, reduced to a theory—that is, to a theory of how to produce or what to produce—subsumed within a broader historical framework concerned with anthropological and cultural dimensions. For example, Foucher and Coomaraswamy, oft-quoted Gandhāra scholars from the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century, each maintained a particular aesthetic standpoint in ways that contribute to their art theory. In their writings, a set of assumptions and reflections on the nature of aesthetic experience intervene in their proposed accounts of the "origin" of the Buddha images. As this article observes, such reduction results from efforts to formulate a communicable model for the "origin" of the Buddha image. It is further hoped that such an approach may advance the interdisciplinary aims advocated below.

2. Aesthetic Experience and Pleasure in Buddhist Teachings

Here, I will firstly refer to Richard Gombrich's symposium text entitled "Buddhist Aesthetics?" (2013) as a starting point to my argument. In the text, Gombrich puts forth a philological viewpoint on how to conceptualize aesthetics in Buddhist teachings and culture. His main argument is that aesthetics for him is a theory of pleasurable beauty that proves incompatible with Buddhist teachings, and particularly with those on pleasure. According to Gombrich, the term "Buddhist aesthetics" can make sense only if its scope is broadened to include both the enjoyment of meditative tranquility (*śānta rasa*) and the attitude involved in producing and using artifacts to convey a Buddhist message. Drawing on passages from the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* and the *Puṇṇovāda Sutta* of the Pāli Canon, Gombrich construes the Buddhist injunction toward emotional neutrality ("observe, but do not react") and presents the most widely recognizable accounts in Buddhist literature on apperception and pleasure–suffering dialectics.

For Gombrich, a "corroborative" inference can be made from Sanskrit aesthetic theory initially conceived as treatises mainly on theater (he does not specify the source). An "emotion experienced in real life is paired off with the aesthetic sentiment which corresponds to it when we experience that emotion aesthetically" (R. Gombrich 2013: 141), that is to say, in some sort of relations with pleasure. Out of these pairings, that of sexual love (*rati*), the most representative of the eight or nine presented, always tops the list; its "corresponding aesthetic sentiment" is *śṛṅgāra*, "finery". From this, Gombrich posits that "It is therefore hardly surprising that a religion which recommends detachment from worldly pleasures leaves little or no room

for aesthetic enjoyment." (142) Sensual pleasure is said to be epitomized by sexual love, which is subsequently "paired off" with an aesthetic sentiment of finery, making it unviable for the practice of Buddhism. In this thesis, the concept of aesthetics as a theory of pleasurable beauty is untenable in Buddhist tradition since beauty, erotic or not, leads necessarily into an appreciation and onto suffering: a path that is incommensurable with the goal of spiritual progress. Sensual pleasure is opposed to the commitment to Buddhist ideals—a rationale for considering aesthetics as inadequate for Buddhism. Paying sensory attention to a particular emotional state and compensation, sensual or sexual pleasure, verbal or conceptual proliferation within the mind are some of the things to be avoided.

Gombrich makes a steep transition from the above discussion—pertaining to the inadequacy of the notion of aesthetics as theory of beauty to Buddhist teachings and ideals—to introducing a Buddhist art theory by "broaden(ing) the question to investigating the Buddhist attitude to art" for "a more positive conclusion" (158). The only way pleasure can be of avail is if it is so directed to transpire the enjoyment of tranquillity, as per *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. Gombrich enumerates five verses describing examples of tranquillity experienced amid multifarious situations, all having to do with hampering of finding equanimity through self-control and training. There, he identifies a form of appreciation that is valuable to Buddhist beliefs: accepting the evanescent nature of beauty, typically exemplified by cherry blossom in Japanese Buddhism. Gombrich theorizes that "The Buddhist attitude to beauty which I have outlined certainly does not amount to an aesthetic theory, though it could be adduced as a justification for not having such a theory(,)" essentially determining his idea of aesthetics as incompatible with Buddhist teachings. Gombrich here distinguishes his

version of aesthetics from his Buddhist art theory which consists in conveying Buddhist messages and recited experiences of meditation; although these messages "can and should… be derived from nature" (159).

These fragments of Buddhist teachings and accepted doctrines with particular notions of pleasure, emotion, and beauty, may be regarded as empirically well-founded. The Buddha's foundational injunction to "observe, but not react" emotionally or avoid overconceptualizing, certainly bears both pragmatist and critically reflective dimensions of experience. But, in building towards a conclusion based on these grammaticized notions, Gombrich's philological account ceases to be empirical on two fronts: his narrowing down of the meaning of the word "aesthetics" to a theory of pleasurable beauty and his "broadening" of the domain of aesthetics to a theory of Buddhist art. A strictly empirical critique would have it, however, that the term "aesthetic" cannot designate a specific category of knowledge, but only a specific type of experience. In other words, there is no such thing as a specific "aesthetic" cognition or perception that can be generalized. The term cannot designate a specific group of objects either; using the term "aesthetic" to designate objects or events must in turn rely on certain ontological assumptions and hermeneutics. It is for this reason that Kant used the adjective "aesthetic" not to indicate an ontological or conceptual category or the property of objects and events, but to designate a type of experience: the very voluntarily met relations *for which* one becomes attentive towards those objects and events (Kant [1790] 1987). In other words, "aesthetic" for Kant is but a nomenclature designating first and foremost an attentional activity of being attentive to one's own unravelling experience. The adjective must indicate discernible experiential aspects that are *endogenous* to attentional experience and its continuum. This reasoning is

still valid in today's cognitive and neurological research: the term "aesthetic" is more aptly applied to the way one utilizes mental resources (attention, anticipatory capacities and sometimes emotions) for a certain type of cognitive experience that requires motivation and energy distribution.[1] In this sense, aesthetics refers to an inquiry into the aesthetic—into one's relating to the world—and, more specifically, into the nature of aesthetic experience as the attentive, anticipatory engagement with one's environment (sometimes affectively inflected and sometimes not), before it can be an individual's theorization of mental content.

Gombrich asks the crucial question: "Aesthetics is about beauty. Can beauty be dissociated from sensual pleasure?" (140). The above Kantian prolegomenon had a similar problem regarding the concept of pleasure. Introducing the concept of pleasure that is disinterested—that is, attending to the object unswayed by emotional outburst or pragmatic thoughts—was part of Kant's attempt to justify the universality of aesthetic judgment. Without being able to judge whether the capacity to feel pleasure can constitute a transcendental condition, aesthetic judgment is said to be imputable to every human being as *a* subject on the basis of the capacity for pleasure, whereas this *a priori* imputation does not necessarily require that the pleasure in question be disinterested. As Kant admits:

> When we make a judgment of taste, the pleasure we feel is something we require from everyone else as necessary, just as if, when we call something beautiful, we had to regard beauty as a characteristic of the object,

1 Cf. Winkielman *et al*. 2003; Freedberg & Gallese 2007; Wassiliwizky & Menninghaus 2008; Shusterman 2006; Berridge & Kringelbach 2015; Gefen 2015; Nanay 2016 (particularly Ch. 2: "Distributed Attention"); Brielmann & Pelli 2018.

> determined in it according to concepts, even though in fact, apart from a reference to the subject's feeling, beauty is nothing by itself. We must, however, postpone discussion of this question until we have answered another one, namely, whether and how aesthetic judgments are possible *a priori*. (Kant [1790] 1987: 219 [§9])

Kant's solution to this "problem of particularity"[2] was to suggest that the kind of pleasure arising in aesthetic experience need not be exclusive to the kind of pleasure in (as opposed to 'of') having an idea from intuition or thought process. The two can be "attributed" to each other (in the brain) in the continuation of the subject's feeling, without which "beauty is nothing by itself." It was to attribute the double-sided mental attunement of the aesthetic association and of the logical association (or what Kant saw as the work of imagination oscillating between aesthetic attributes and logical attributes) to the pleasure in having and forming an inherently aesthetic idea through free play of imagination and intellect (Kant [1790] 1987: 63). As Hume insisted before Kant, pleasure is the *currency* of the aesthetic, not a byproduct that must be prevented from arising (Hume [1739] 1992: 299). This is compatible with what a "more positive" conclusion in Gombrich's presentation of Buddhist teachings in relation to the aesthetic: working through pleasure-suffering dialectics and finding joy in equanimity and tranquility both require understanding the role of pleasure in how we chooses to utilize and improve our complexly innervated layers of attentional activities.

My claim is, firstly, that, while it may be considered reasonable to see

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2 A term used by A. Chignell (Chignell 1998).

a disparity between Gombrich's briefly presented theory of pleasurable beauty and Buddhist teachings, it is still possible to locate and point out empirically adequate tenets regarding pleasure and aesthetic experience in Buddhist teachings. Secondly, we can do so in ways that are compatible with today's empirical findings *without* sacrificing the role of aesthetic enjoyment in producing artifacts and the hedonic dimension of the mind, and *without* opposing pleasure to displeasure by equating or reducing aesthetic experience to subsequent thought processes.

In neurobiological terms, what is described in Buddhist scriptures as "enjoyment of equanimity and tranquility" corresponds to the fully extended limit of *valence* in feelings and thoughts that can accommodate any external changes through internal *somatic* transformation. Since this valence is the currency of cognitive experience (including aesthetic experience), and since it is involved in every emotional state, no typology is possible with regards to pleasure or displeasure (Schaeffer 2015: 199; cf. Kahneman 1973). It can be described as an intensity-based encoder to our emotions and thoughts (Shizgal 1999). As the landscape of experiential field of the aesthetic becomes more and more complex, the intensity and scope of bodily or sensual pleasure become less and less of a matter to our overall enjoyment. As suggested by Buddhist teachings on decisive causation (*karma*) and meditative training (*dhammā*), knowing oneself (evolving meta-cognition) requires being attentive to one's own attentional trails in an unavoidable loop with valence:

> In the fundamental texts on meditation, the *Satipaṭṭhāna* and *Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas*, the meditator has to train himself to see reality as the Buddha has taught it to be. He is to do this in four stages. First he

> learns to observe physical processes in his own and other people's bodies; then he learns to be similarly aware of feelings; then of states of mind. Finally he learns to be aware of *dhammā* (plural). This has been rendered as 'his thoughts'. But the *dhammā* that the text spells out are in fact the teachings of the Buddha, such as the four noble truths. The meditator moves from thinking *about* those teachings to thinking *with* them: he learns (to use an anachronistic metaphor) to see the world through Buddhist spectacles. The Buddha's teachings come to be the same as (any) objects of thought, because anything else is (for Buddhists) unthinkable. Thus the *dhammā* are the elements of reality as understood by the Buddha (R. Gombrich 2006: 35–36).

Likewise, it can be argued that one can no longer speak of pleasure as being an emotion itself or as having a different origin from that of displeasure or pain. It is rather that, by progressively working through our attentional activities, our cognition ought to be oriented to anticipate via valence *and* accommodate all somatic feeling arising from an intensive (mostly emotionally charged) mental state (Zajonc 1980; Shizgal 1999). It has been incessantly observed in cognitive psychology that, since an emotional state do not occur independently of their psychophysiological markers, and since all emotions are hedonically marked, all aesthetic emotions necessarily overlap in some ways but can only be distinguished according to their respective situational content (Damasio 1999; Panksepp 2005; Chatterjee 2010). From these findings, it becomes clear that the sheer difficulties of 'rewiring the wiring' of the mind, of emotion–hedonic markers through suffering are irrevocably felt as displeasure (or a negative pole of valence within *karma*). And since all emotions are oriented by valence and activated through

somatic feeling(s), the capacity to remain unaffected by any emotion would mean that the continuum of experience is no longer dictated by the historically accumulated 'weight' of past valence-oriented attentional activities.

> … *karma* is not the only cause of our pleasure and pain…: our *karma* determines the general conditions such as where we are born, a framework within which more obvious kinds of cause, such as disease, take effect… When it comes to new *karma*, we can choose, but only within limits, the most important of which we have ourselves established through our former choices (R. Gombrich 2010: 335).

Emotional "neutrality", in an unending perceptual flow that we call experience, can be pursued by becoming more and more aware of the nature of one's aesthetic experience, the attention-valence loop affecting feeling, interlocked with a given pragmatic environment (cf. Berridge 2003; Chatterjee 2003). Also, our attentional resources cannot be consciously mobilized to perceive the 'departure' of emotions, but all emotional states—most of which come from more implicit neural systems which cannot access phenomenal consciousness—cause attention to be 'funnelled' to multi-layered circuits involving feelings and thoughts (LeDoux & Phelps 2005). It is perhaps with a transformation of this funnelling that *indriya-saṃzvara* or "restraint of the senses", duly mentioned by Gombrich, must be concerned (R. Gombrich 2013: 138). Pelowski *et al*. call this transformation "schema-change", which "allows a view to reset their interaction… that may allow for a more "harmonious" interaction, improved or deepened engagement, as well as the ability to attend to or process previously overlooked…"

(Pelowski *et al*., 2012: 248; cf. Higgins 2006; Strohl & Nguyen 2024).

3. Theory of Buddhist Art: Reduction and Communication

Gombrich claims that "the Buddhist attitude to art is to see it as a form of communication," (160) citing Tolstoy's theory of art as emotional communication. Nevertheless, Buddhist teachings are seen as advocating complete abstention from emotion and sensual pleasure in the pursuit of equanimity and the enjoyment of tranquillity. Aesthetic considerations are "completely irrelevant" to Buddhist art "created in a spirit of devotion". He quotes Raja de Silva who, speaking of wall paintings in Sri Lanka, says that the quasi-unified theme of the life or past lives of the Buddha was purported to "direct the mind of the viewer (devotee) to the theme, which is done in pure adoration" (137). At the same time, he does look to establish a possible linkage with the described state of tranquillity and unhindered enjoyment which could not have constituted a subject matter for "representational art" (146). He further dissociates Buddhist teachings from the aesthetic sphere by reinforcing his argument (setting aesthetics understood as a theory of pleasurable beauty apart from Buddhist principles) with a mention of the longstanding practice of worshipping Buddha artifacts "as if they were alive" (155). As Gombrich ascribes the "*raison d'être*" of Buddhist art to the honoring of devotion, the benefits of signalling veneration, and the offering of fine forms, he simultaneously strips Buddhist artifacts and the practice of making them of any consideration of aesthetic quality. Citing de Silva, Gombrich further emphasizes that the mind of the devoted viewer is

not to be understood in "aesthetic" terms at all. Instead, he characterizes the maker's or donor's act of formal cognition in producing Buddhist artifacts as "aesthetic"—a use that, in his own account, was disqualified when considerations of ritual efficacy or devotional function was said to take precedence. The term "aesthetic" can carry a Buddhist value if it helps rituals and devotional acts—a possibility that cannot be adequately assessed on the basis of the emotional state or pleasure of the viewer, devoted or not. Gombrich concludes that the purpose of communicating a Buddhist message is not aesthetics, but can be broadened to embrace "a view of art or an attitude to art" (160). However, as shown in the preceding paragraphs, the human conditions that enable aesthetic experience—the attention–valence loop affecting cognition—is common and invariable in both the mind for production or offering and the mind for devotion. The former state would be mindful of inviting the advent of the latter to certain visual details and instigate a particular discernment of forms among in a pragmatic environment. Attention's perpetual implication with markers of valence must be presupposed in both the former and latter mind if indeed any 'value' or 'meaning' were to be drawn from a Buddhist artifact, and if having or recognizing value requires an cognitive experience of the work. The experience of devotion and veneration are but a small part of the myriad of ways of utilizing and being affected by attention–valence dynamics.

In the above reading of Gombrich, Buddhist teachings are said to suggest that aesthetics as a theory of pleasurable beauty ought be reduced to a theory of devotional art, and the rationale for this reduction rests on what appears to be a philologically defensible choice. And indeed many historians of Buddhist art might agree with his approach. He establishes a model for devotional–pedagogical theory of Buddhist art by disqualifying

the ancient Indian artistic activities of any personal pleasure as unfit for practical Buddhist principles. But we also saw that the noticeable rift that he finds between his notion of aesthetics and his art history is an illusion. An empirically sound (that is, factually verifiable) conceptualization of aesthetic experience is also noticeable in Buddhism, and this as per Gombrich's own writings. Since all devotional activities are described to be imbued with some kind of emotion or any kind of endogenous psychophysiological reminder, and since every emotional state is implicated in our attentional experience via valence (pleasure/displeasure), any distinction between the pleasure in feeling in general and the pleasure in having an idea by thought process (or indeed any distinction between any aspects of pleasure's involvement in experience) is factitious. In both Buddhist teachings and naturalistic aesthetics (informed by neurobiology and cognitive psychology), valence is seen as the currency of cognitive experience.

The characteristics noticeable in the above reductive approach can be traced back to an age-old question: Can a theory of aesthetic experience permit a theory or ontology of art? Such question is at the heart of the post-eighteenth century European art history and aesthetics (cf. Panofsky 1968; Cheetham 1988). It is still necessary to consider anew the dangers of using the term "aesthetic" too narrowly (on pleasurable beauty) or too broadly (on all endogenous feelings and thoughts): dangers of reducing aesthetics to an art theory and of generalization respectively. I formulated the question in this fashion to emphasize two points. First, at its foundation, such question necessitated a critique of teleological judgment on the artist's mind in Kant's deductive enterprise, which meant he had to distinguish the aesthetic and the artistic dimension in his statements. This concern is shown throughout his third *Critique* where he insists on the idea that aesthetic

judgment is intersubjectively validated by the bias of *sensus communis*, such that aesthetic judgment (and consequently any criticism involving judgment) is determined "only by feeling rather than by concepts" (Kant 1987: 238). Secondly, while *sensus communis* is presented as a kind of transcendental condition that constitutes aesthetic judgment in each subject's experience, an art historian (like R. Gombrich) might suggest that it is more an ideal postulated as a regulatory principle of judgment (cf. Fried 2016).

Such a question played a seminal role in shaping the discourses of the "art of art history" and post-colonial cultural theory, where scholars grew increasingly hesitant to rely on ancient Greek or modern Prussian aesthetic canons as theoretical frameworks. This development is inseparable from the disciplinary formation of art history that was modelled after those of archaeology, literature, philology, and philosophy (Preziosi 1992: 7). Such reluctance has also been evident in art-historical studies on Buddhist arts. Across these discussions, two claims recur: first, that Western aesthetic theories based on idealism are often inadequate for explaining or interpreting their findings when such theories fail to meet the historiographical stance and phenomenological commitment to evidentiality required (cf. Burkhardt 1943); and second, that the language used for visual analysis of artifacts cannot faithfully be translated in the language of metaphors and criticism (cf. Baxandall 1979; Arasse 1997).

In the case of Buddhist artifacts, conveying a Buddhist message to the viewer is the most commonly mentioned purpose of Buddhist artists. This is largely based on biographical stories of the Buddha proclaiming that his practical purpose (of using language) was to "convey meaning, and anything that might impede communication was to be discarded" (R. Gombrich 2009; Gombrich 2010). The communicative aspect of experiencing artifacts like

paintings (*citra rasa*) does not simply discard, however, affects in multi-layered connections with the environment. The fifth and sixth century CE saw a "subjective turn"—leaning towards a 'viewer-activation' view—shown in *Citrasūtra* explaining the "praxis of *rasa*… juxtaposing objective qualities with subjective imperative" (Sarker 2021: 104; cf. Mukherji 2001). Likewise, the theory of art presented in the Hindu scriptures (e.g. *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* in which appears *Citrasūtra*) reflect a shift away from representational theory and towards a type of evocative symbolism and narratives (Dehejia 1997; S. Huntington 1990; Parker 2001; Williams 1987), emphasizing communication. In short, as Coomaraswamy asserted, aesthetic virtue can be understood as having "survive[d] in the art forms" (Coomaraswamy 1938: 178) only if it ceases to appear to us as representing an ideal or proclaiming an order of unmediated transformation of material irrespective of perception (*acheiropoieton*). Symbolism, as Coomaraswamy declares, "is a calculus in the same sense that an adequate analogy is proof" (Coomaraswamy 1938: 174).

4. Naturalizing the Question of "Origin" as Referent

For art-historians concerned with the ancient Buddha images, establishing the empirical grounds on which the Buddha's teachings may be understood as "surviving" involved explaining the cognitive mechanisms that render images intelligible and an ontology of art in a coherent conceptual language. If the discourses concerned with communicating the most foundational ideas through Buddhist artifacts are what constructs what we know of as "theory of Buddhist art", they do so by rendering much of the traditional lexicon of aesthetics largely inapplicable or even

inert. In these discourses, the word "origin" denotes both archaeological "original"—understood as the existence or discovery of the earliest identifiable Buddha image—and/or experiential "source"—that is, the practice of image-making within workshop or "guild" under patronal instruction.[3]

These discourses, starting in the late nineteenth century, were shaped above all by a divide between, on the one hand, advocates of a unilateral Greco-Roman or Bactrian influence (e.g. Leitner, Fergusson, Foucher, Grünwedel) and, on the other, those who resisted such an explanation (e.g., Coomaraswamy, Havell, J. Huntington, S. Huntington). This tension is well exemplified by Coomaraswamy's defence of an indigenous theory against the theoretical prejudices of contemporaries such as Foucher. In his essay "The Nature of Buddhist Art," Coomaraswamy employs the term "image" in an equivocal manner, using it to denote both perceived visual form and object of perception. "… it was a matter of convenience… that the advent of the [Buddha's anthropomorphic] image can be said to have been "postponed", and also as a matter of convenience that the image was realized when a need had been felt for it…" (Coomaraswamy [1938] 1977: 158) Other art-historians working on this "origin" issue have proposed a wide range of significations for the aniconic images (cf. Krishan 1996; Behrendt 2007). The issues involved asking whether aniconic symbolism existed in Gandhāra at all (van Lohuizen-de Leeuw 1981); questions regarding the precedence between aniconic and iconic forms (J. Huntington 1985; S. Huntington 1990; Falser 2015); whether European iconographical methods used to differentiate between images can accommodate the lack of distinctive features from the pre-esoteric phase

3 The very use of the words such as "original" for archaeological origin and "source" for the experiential origin is already idealistic and concept-dependent. It depends on the reassurance of the assumption that the words stand for something definite.

(Rhi 2022), among others.

Coomaraswamy's theosophical, highly discursive later writings mark an important juncture in the studies of the ancient Buddha images and, in particular, on their 'origin'. According to Coomaraswamy, the devotional rendering of human emotion as a factor contributing to the first usage of the Buddha figure can be inferred from the devotionalist *Bhakti*[4] doctrine of the *Bhagavad Gitā* (Coomaraswamy 1927; Coomaraswamy [1938] 1977; cf. Rowland Jr. 1963; J. Huntington 1985: 49; S. Huntington 1990: 405). Coomaraswamy makes a direct reference to the late-nineteenth century German Indologist Hermann Jacobi who saw the *Bhakti* as "the supreme means of salvation". In his article "Buddhist Primitives" where he writes about the problem of the "origin" for the first time (Coomaraswamy 1916), Coomaraswamy contends that, before the earliest known aniconic images, represented figures of the Buddha were possibly already in use in private settings. Coomaraswamy also cites Okakura Kakuzo's *Ideals of the East* from 1904 in seeking to specify that there are pre-Gandhāran images made of more perishable materials (Rhi 2010: 153). He contended that "The Buddha image came into being because a need had been felt for it, and not because a need had been felt for 'art'" (Coomaraswamy [1938] 1977: 164).

Most notably, as J. Huntington pointed out, Coomaraswamy and Foucher both refer to the advocation of the *Bhakti* cult as a kind of token by which the need for images survives. Determining whether aniconic representations were used for artistic reasons—that is, reasons pertaining to the process of planning, preparing, and executing for an approval—or for

4 The *Bhakti* movement was based on the "idea of attaining liberation through the means of *Bhakti*, where the devotion towards the supreme was regarded as the only way of reaching to God" (Pokhrel 2025: 77).

theological coherence—that is, to allowing the lessons of the Buddha to be transmitted—remains a question of ethics. As is now generally accepted, the earliest known Buddhist images are dubbed "aniconic"—meaning depictions such as the empty throne or footprints that avoid representing the corporeal form of the Buddha—and, as Linrothe notes, "no [anthropomorphic or iconic] Buddha images seem to occur in any of the pre-Common Era sites now known" (Linrothe 1993: 253). As things stand, the earliest securely identified anthropomorphic images of the Buddha appear somewhat later, in distinctly different styles in Gandhāra, Mathurā, and Āndhra (Rhi 2008; Rhi 2013; cf. Srinivasan: 2006).[5]

For Dehejia, the frequently used aniconic images of an empty throne, a parasol, a pillar of radiance and a tree (mainly in Bhārhut and Sāñcī, but also in Gandhāra) are "indexical signs" that "[point] to the presence of the Buddha" (Dehejia 1997: 37). Dehejia introduces the concept of indexical sign—taken from Charles Peirce—to illustrate the logic by which those representations are discerned: an event irrevocably entailing physical traces (e.g. a bullet hole or a smoking gun). Understood in this light, as the claim goes, a notion of causal relationship between the perceived visual and the referent can be established. These signs thereby "acquire their meaning… through an immediate and direct relationship to their referent" and "need not necessarily, or even mostly, be confined to reality" (Dehejia 1997: 42). And situated in this historiographic "baggage" (Dehejia 1991: 45), the attendant scholarly and ethno-political tensions formed the milieu from which renewed calls to reconsider the episteme of *image*—understood as represen-

5 The correlative relationship between style and provenance of the iconic Gandhāran artifacts have been put forward more recently by Pons (Pons 2018; Pons 2024).

tation endowed with meaning—emerged. And as Rhi argues, the apparent precedence of aniconic Buddhist artifacts made it necessary to rethink the conception of the image as something that designates a referent through perceived visual forms.

Dehejia's above interpretation is noteworthy in that it exemplifies the tension between recurrent referential theories of meaning and the Buddha's teachings (on tranquillity, neutrality, enlightenment and the perils of conceptual proliferation). However, it is also worth remembering that, in his later work, Coomaraswamy's "transcendentalist" (Rapael 1977; O'Donnell 2019), perennialist orientation operated increasingly on the assumption that all referents—in our understanding of the artifact's verbalized or idealized functions including the Buddha as referent—must ultimately be worked through, in accordance with the Buddha's teaching of selflessness and the Buddhist doctrine of *Anattā* (Coomaraswamy [1938] 1977: 178). Rhi observes that these circumstances amount to asking what an image fundamentally is and how it can be defined (Rhi 2010: 170). He harkens back to Coomaraswamy's later writings in which aniconic symbols are sometimes described as more valuable or said to be disparate in comparison to images *qua* representations with definite referent.

As J. Huntington observed, the aesthetic conception of the origin of the Buddha image is present in both Foucher and Coomaraswamy. Foucher's assumption of popular origin[6] is linked to the enthusiastic reception of the Indo-Greek type of Buddha image, while Coomaraswamy's resistance to this linkage is based on using the popularized *Bhakti* movement

6 "Since when, moreover, and in what country does popular devotion trouble itself about the dogmatic scruples of the doctors?" (Foucher 1917: 7).

in which emotional development is recognized as a key method of devotion, as the basis of his indigenous theory of the origin (J. Huntington 1985: 49). Both these accounts are true to their evidence; but can they be seen as compatible to each other? There seems to be no irony in accepting both Foucher's linking desire to popularization and his applying the same principle of desire to surmise that there was a desire among the population to accept European influences: he is simply taking the phenomenon of attraction and curiosity for granted. Coomaraswamy likewise characterized the early Buddhist conception of art as "strictly hedonistic" in his essay "Buddhist Primitives" (Rhi 2010: 155). For both Foucher and Coomaraswamy, it was conceivable that a group of people voluntarily extend the experience of paying attention to an image or of making an image and creating variations of whatever model or 'image' they possessed. Popular representations are what they are because they provide satisfaction. Inversely, their rejection is rooted in the valence-conditioned ramifications of such satisfaction.

Foucher and Coomaraswamy are both vulnerable to the objection that there is no essential community between the social epistemic systems of present and past cultures (Shusterman 2000: 142). Any claim for community depends on communicating of what survives. What, in fact, survives in the history of art, and what makes the communication of experiential narratives across time possible? Over the long term, what appears to endure is not a determinate referent but a common currency of valence, in relation to which our responses fluctuate and our mental images evolve in blurred and shifting ways. Pleasure is always imputable to positive valence in "ordinary" flow of experience or "fluency"[7] and but not counterintuition. In other

words, it serves adaptive functions (cf. Winkielman et al. 2003; Berridge & Kringelbach 2015). To admit what is counterintuitive into an acceptable—even enjoyable—experience requires a heuristic stance toward our own attentional orientation, that is, an attitude that recognizes its own biases within attention–valence dynamics.

Both aesthetics and art history presuppose some orientation toward textual, graphic, or verbal communication; yet the very notion of what constitutes a communication is notoriously difficult to define. But what is the object of communication, the Buddha's message? If we were to follow the Buddha's teachings and find them in the Buddhist artifacts, we must ask if his object of communication can survive. If Buddhist artifacts are taken to communicate a message, that message must, in some sense, be said to survive. An archaeologist, or an art-historian for that matter, cannot study and specify something that doesn't survive. But at the same time, the Buddha's message, if without referent, cannot be said to be referring *to* or pointing *at* anything specific. A referent cannot survive the passing images.

5. Conclusion

Aesthetics as a study of aesthetic relations does not, need not proclaim the aesthetic as a category of knowledge, nor a special kind of cognitive ability. The viewpoint of this article recognizes the term "aesthetic" therefore as describing a type of experience, of attentionally and emotionally charged

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7 Fluency in cognitive neuroscience is the ease of cognitive processing hinged on positive aesthetic valence independently of stimulus content—though excessive fluency leads to boredom, limiting its pleasurable effect.

cognitive experience, rather than as a descriptive adjective. This empirically informed notion of aesthetics can be drawn from Buddhism. R. Gombrich finds the argument that there is no Buddhist art counterintuitive. I find Gombrich's reduction both too narrow and helpful. Too narrow because he is highly selective in his explanation on beauty and aesthetics; helpful because his reading of Buddhist scriptures allows for an empirically sound conceptualization of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is an enhanced meta-attentional (attending to one's own use of attention) process; or, the ways in which we attend to the unfolding of our own anticipatory use of attention in a pragmatic environment. It is the process that Buddhist teachings recount as susceptible in everyone's experience and a way of somatic control and training. I argued that the term "aesthetics" cannot designate a person's way of theorizing content, but an inquiry into the aesthetic—that is, one's own affective relation to the world—and the nature of aesthetic experience.

We saw that aesthetics is often reduced to presenting propositions on how to or what to produce works. Based on my critique of R. Gombrich, I tried to naturalize the question of the "origin" of the Buddha image and could observe the need for multiple disciplines (art history, aesthetics, cognitive and neurosciences, anthropology, philology, and philosophy among others). A strict naturalistic view[8] would have it that the aesthetic cannot be exemplified analogically by rationality or understood as causal to an ontology of art

8 As Dewey rightly put, "the existence of the works of art upon which formation of an [aesthetic] theory depends has become an obstruction to theory about them" (Dewey [1934] 2005: 1). Or, as Schaeffer says, "the idea according to which there exists a 'pure mode of immediate givenness' through which a pure form would produce a pure aesthetic sentiment does not correspond to anything real" (Schaeffer 2015: 32; my translation).

and artwork (as did post-eighteenth century European Idealist philosophy). In this view, the aesthetic and the artistic dimension, in our experiential continuum, are linked factually and intricately, but never logically. In Buddhist cultures, they are linked by the common aim of communication of the Buddha's messages, but without agreeing on what constitutes an instance of communication. An idealistic effort to communicate, especially in the Buddha's sense, must ask if what has been communicated through Buddhist artifacts ought not to be a single referent or set of referents.

What survives in the history of art, since the origin, is still to be communicated; it must be worked through the neurobiological conditions of life. Human communication (of which aesthetics and art history are but two forms) always presupposes valence and anticipated fluency within a populated practical environment and tends to regain a disposition in which to mobilize attention and emotion in having an experience. In these conditions, pleasure need not depend on attending to a referent, whereas displeasure appears to require a securely identifiable one, a target of attention. Over a long period of time, this asymmetry seems to have encouraged the survival of the most impoverished conception of aesthetic experience within art-historical discourse.

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초록

실증적 미학과 불교예술의 역사

부처상의 "기원" 논의에 대한 최근 성찰의 함의

손지민*

본 논문은 불교미술, 특히 부처상(佛陀像)의 '기원'에 관한 최근의 예술사적 연구에서 제시된 미적 경험 개념과 미학 개념 사이의 상이한 입장들을 검토하고, 수정하며, 나아가 조정하는 것을 목표로 한다. 필자는 먼저 한 인도학자의 '불교 미학'(Buddhist aesthetics) 개념화를 비판적으로 분석하고, 이를 출발점으로 삼아 미적 경험에 대한 실증적 설명을 불교의 가르침에 접목하여 제안한다. 이러한 관점을 토대로 본 논문은 관련 예술사 담론에서 미학 이론이 수행하는 역할을 검토하고, 그 과정에서 미학이 예술 이론으로 환원되는 양상을 드러낸다. 본 논문이 지적하듯이, 이러한 환원은 부처상 '기원'에 대한 설명 모델을 정식화하려는 시도에서 비롯된다. 이 '기원' 문제를 둘러싼 논쟁은 미학과 예술사가 공통적으로 직면하고 있는 '소통의 문제'를 분명히 보여준다. 본 논문은 미적 경험의 본질에 대한 과학적 연구결과들을 바탕으로 한 탐구가 이러한 논쟁들을 생산적으로 조정할 수 있는 이론적 틀을 제공할 수 있음을 제안한다.

주제어 미적 체험, 감정가(感情價), 부처상, 간다라 예술, 기원

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