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The Ohio State University College of the Arts

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Piercing the Veil by Alan Crockett,
1985, oil on canvas, 68"x60".

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Address

Office of Arts Information and
Publications
College of the Arts
The Ohio State University
403 Mershon Auditorium
30 West Fifteenth Avenue
Columbus, Ohio 43210-1393

The "Great" Buddhas of Asia

John C. Huntington
Professor of History of Art

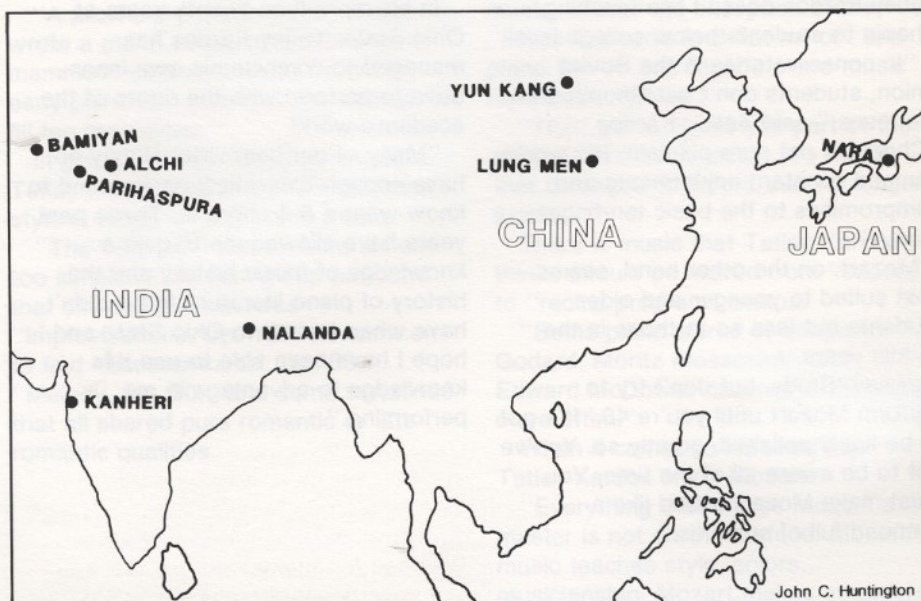
John C. Huntington is professor of Buddhist iconology and East Asian art history at The Ohio State University. His research interests cover both the historical development of Buddhist art throughout Asia and the communicative content of Buddhist art. He has published widely in his field, covering material from India, Pakistan, Inner Asia, China and Japan. He is especially known for his work with Tibetan Buddhist art and on both the early development of and iconology of Buddhist art in general. He has traveled extensively throughout Asia doing research and visiting sites of interest to document them photographically. He is particularly well known as a photographer of Asian art and, with over 15,000 photographs in print, is one of the world's most extensively published photographers of fine art.

Across Asia there are, or are the archaeological remains of, sculptures of Buddhas that truly stagger the imagination by their size. Frequently made on a scale that stretched the technologies of their respective cultures to the limit, these colossi are known as the "Great" or *Brihad* Buddhas simply because of their monumental scale. The largest of all is the figure at the vast monastic complex near the modern town of Bamiyan in central Afghanistan (Figure 1). Standing slightly over 175 feet tall, the figure is of Vairocana Buddha, the Buddha who symbolizes the universality of the teachings contained in the Buddhist law (*Dharma*). Not only does the size of the image indicate Vairocana's universality but, originally, the niche in which the figure stands was decorated with paintings of the various Buddhas, and Buddhist deities of many kinds, who are believed to emanate from the "Great" Buddha much as light is emitted from a light bulb. These beings are thought of as "reflections" of the "Great" Buddha. Although differentiated from him in observable form, in the Buddhist concept of

absolute reality, their ultimate nature is that they are identical to him. This identity with the universal technically extends to all monks and lay members of the Buddhist community as well. Indeed, the realization of such identity is the final goal of the Buddhist meditational practices.

There are several additional extant images of Vairocana and other "Great" Buddhas in Asia and a number of others are known to have existed. These latter are known only from written sources, archaeological remains or, in one case, paintings of a now lost image. The paintings, created three centuries after the construction of the shrine itself, document one of the most spectacular of all such examples (Figure 7).

By far the most famous of the Vairocana images is that housed in the Daibutsu-den at Todai-ji ("Great Eastern Temple") in the ancient Japanese capital city of Nara (Figure 2). Now much restored, but still the world's largest wooden building, the Daibutsu-den ("Hall of the Great Buddha") was first created in the mid-eighth century by the Emperor Shomu



Asia showing locations mentioned in text

John C. Huntington

as an act of faith after being reunited with his mother (who had refused to see him since the day of his birth). It soon became the imperial temple of Japan. In a document in his own handwriting and preserved in a unique treasure house at the temple, Shomu tells of how he built the Todai-ji as a place where he could exercise his devotion to the Buddha. This in itself is a complex statement, for, in the native

Shinto religion of Japan, Shomu himself was considered the deity (*kami*) who was the embodiment of the earth of Japan and his well-being was necessary for the success of the seasonal crops in Japan. Since he was the primary earthly manifestation of the Shinto pantheon, his Buddhist devotions to the teachings of the Buddha could be to nothing less than the manifestation of the universality of

the Teachings — Vairocana in his paradise — which is what the Todai-ji represents.

Eighth-century Japan was almost totally dependent on the T'ang heartland of China for its Buddhological information. Even the few "Indian" monks who came to Japan (there was one present at the dedication of the Todai-ji) came by way of China. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the cult of the "Great" Buddha Vairocana was also current in China as well. Excavated between 672 and 675 under the T'ang Dynasty, the famous Lung Men colossus of Vairocana (Figure 3) was one of the ultimate expressions of the flourishing of Buddhism in seventh-century China and was the actual conceptual prototype for the original Todai-ji image. It is traditionally seen by art historians as a statement of an aloof and remote form of technical Buddhism (*Hua yen*), but nothing could be farther from the truth. Once housed in a great temple that covered the image and its attendants, the practitioner would enter the sacred chamber to discover the "Great" Buddha within. He would know that the temple was a metaphor for his own mind and the "Great" Buddha was nothing less than the potential of his own Buddhahood. Confronting this reality on such a scale could only have been an intensely powerful and moving personal experience for the faithful.

One of the most interesting of all the colossal images is the earliest extant *Brihad* image of Vairocana, which also survives in China at a group of five excavated caves at Yun Kang, in the northern part of the country. The caves were commissioned between 460 and 465 by the "Master of the Sramanas [monks]," a title for the priest to the court of the Northern Wei, who was a monk by the name of Tan yao. The caves are thereby known as the "Tan yao caves." The group was probably completed by 494 when the court moved from Datung to Louyang. The caves, with their five gigantic images, were radically new in Chinese Buddhist



Figure 1: 175 foot image at Bamiyan, Afghanistan

The "Great" Buddhas of Asia

John C. Holtzman
Professor of History of Art

architecture of the period. The central cave of this group contains the earliest surviving image of Vairocana (Figure 4). (There has been some dispute about this identification; however, the tiny Buddhas carved in relief on the drapery of the figure are indicative of the vast Multitudes of Buddhas which he is emanating and thus definitively characterize him as Vairocana.)

Something of the background of this image may be determined from the histories of the Northern Wei (*Wei Shu*), in which we learn that Tan yao was the disciple of a Kashmiri monk, Shih-hsien (d. 460), who had preceded him as the priest to the court of the Northern Wei. On the death of the Kashmir priest in 460, Tan yao was appointed to the post. One of the first things he did was to promulgate the order for the excavation and construction of the five related cave temples that now bear his name.

Tan yao was a member of the Toba Wei, who were not Chinese but either a Turkic or Mongol people actively concerned with absorbing the culture of the lands that they had conquered. We can be certain that the Toba Wei were not innovating Buddhist iconographic schema but, as good converts, were trying their best to learn precisely the doctrine of the religion they had adopted. Thus, it may be argued that the Kashmiri monk was very probably responsible for the importation of the concept to China and that Tan yao probably simply followed his teachings on the matter. It must be noted that Shih Hsien would have had little opportunity for the execution of such an elaborate building scheme himself, for, during most of his tenure in the Wei territories there had been a brutal persecution of Buddhism during which Shih Hsien had even been forced to wear secular clothes. As for any "Great" images that might have pre-existed the Tan yao caves in Kashmir, only fragments remain. The largest of these is a finger, more than a foot long, found at Harwan, an ancient Buddhist site just northeast of modern

Srinagar. So, although we can be certain "Great" images existed, we know little of them.

If all the images of "Great" Buddhas were of Vairocana, understanding

these images and their communicative content would be simple: they would be anthropomorphic reifications of the fundamental concept of the universality of the Buddhist *Dharma*. In such a



Figure 2: Vairocana Buddha, Daibutsu-den, Todai-ji Nara, Japan

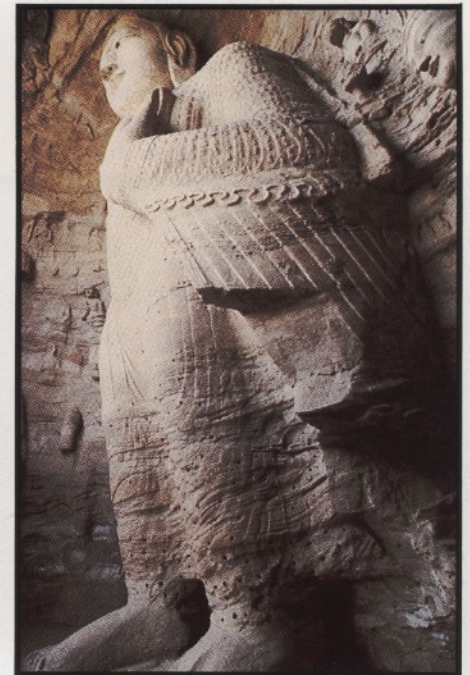


Figure 4: Vairocana Buddha, Yun Kang Cave 18, China



Figure 3: Vairocana Buddha, Lung Men Cave 19, China

case, the various images that exist across Asia would be the traces of a single cult. But there is much more to these images than a single statement, no matter how profound. Some are representations of the Bodhisattva (essentially a Buddha-to-be) Maitreya who according to Buddhists textual tradition, resides in Tushita Paradise, perfecting his knowledge until it is his turn to become the fully enlightened Buddha of this world. His world will be known as Ketumati and will exist some 25,000 years in the future in the location of the present-day Varanasi (Benaras) in India. It is predicted that this will be a time when all men live for tens of thousands of years, and when, because of their accumulated merits, beings will endure no suffering. Throughout much of Asia, there has existed a very important double cult of Maitreya, one for the layman, who sought rebirth either in Tushita paradise to reside with Maitreya immediately after this life, or in Kentumai during the perfected time, and one where the monk practitioner

understands Maitreya as a promise of his own future Buddhahood. Much of the focus of the cult is on charitable acts by the practitioner, who seeks by means of his charity to aid in the preparation of the world for the coming of the time of Ketumati. Maitreya is depicted on a large scale because the texts use the symbolism of size to indicate physical perfection (somehow larger is better) and, since these are representations of totally perfected

beings, they must be of a vast scale.

The cult of the *Brihad* Maitreya was popular throughout Asia by the fifth century and images of this promise of future well-being exist in many areas. One of the earliest surviving examples is again in the Tan yao set of excavated cave temples at Yun Kang (Figure 5). In this representation, the great Bodhisattva of Tushita sits cross-ankled in his paradise. His size, relative to the space surrounding him in

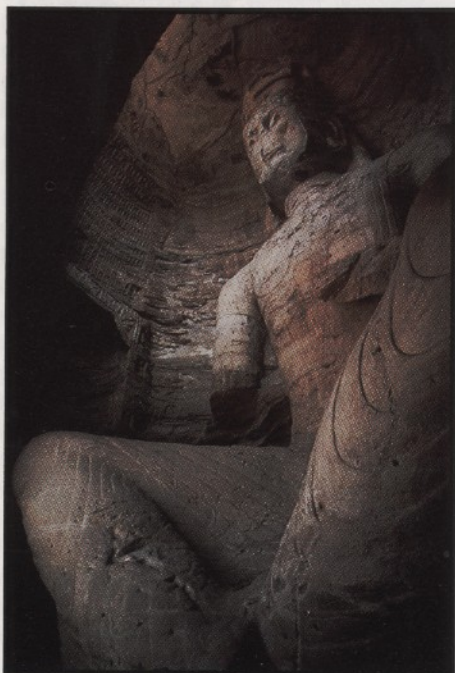


Figure 5: Tusita Maitreya, Yun Kang Cave 17, China



Figure 6: Standing Buddha, one of a pair, in the antechamber of Kanheri, cave three, Bombay region, India

the comparatively small cave, makes him literally impossible to see in his entirety (let alone photograph) without moving about extensively in the cave. The cult surrounding the image has apparently survived, in large measure intact, throughout the Himalayan regions of Ladakh, Nepal and Tibet, where even in the past few years I have witnessed new images being made of seated Maitreyas in Ladakhi Buddhist monasteries. Again, it may be argued that the idea for the "Great" image of Maitreya came to China from Kashmir, but the same lack of evidence frustrates further penetration into the veil of history.

Indeed, in all of the ancient Indic sphere, except for the Buddhist cave sites at Kanheri, north of Bombay, only rudimentary fragments of "Great" Buddhas exist. Monasteries in both the states of Orissa and Bihar seem to have had *Brihad* Buddhas, but only at Kanheri in cave three do any survive intact (Figure 6). Carved in stone during the late fifth century, two colossi flank the antechamber of the entrance to one of the sacred halls of Indian Buddhism. Called either Kausambikuti or Gandhakuti, "Treasure hall" or "Hall of Fragrance," the hall contains a *caitya*, perhaps better known as a *stupa*, a commemorative symbol of the historical teacher, Sakyamuni Buddha, the traditionally identified founder of the Buddhist faith. There is no more revered symbol in all of Buddhism. The fact that these two images were added to the iconographic program of the cave approximately two hundred fifty years after the initial excavation indicates that the cave was "converted" or, at least, "brought up to date" and suggests that these images, although the earliest surviving in India, were by no means the first of such images. By having been added to an existing monument, it is clear that someone somewhere else had such images and that the monks in charge

of the Kanheri cave thought that they would be appropriate additions. The fact that there are two representations

of "Great" Buddhas attached to such a hall indicates that they are neither Vairocana nor the historical Buddha,

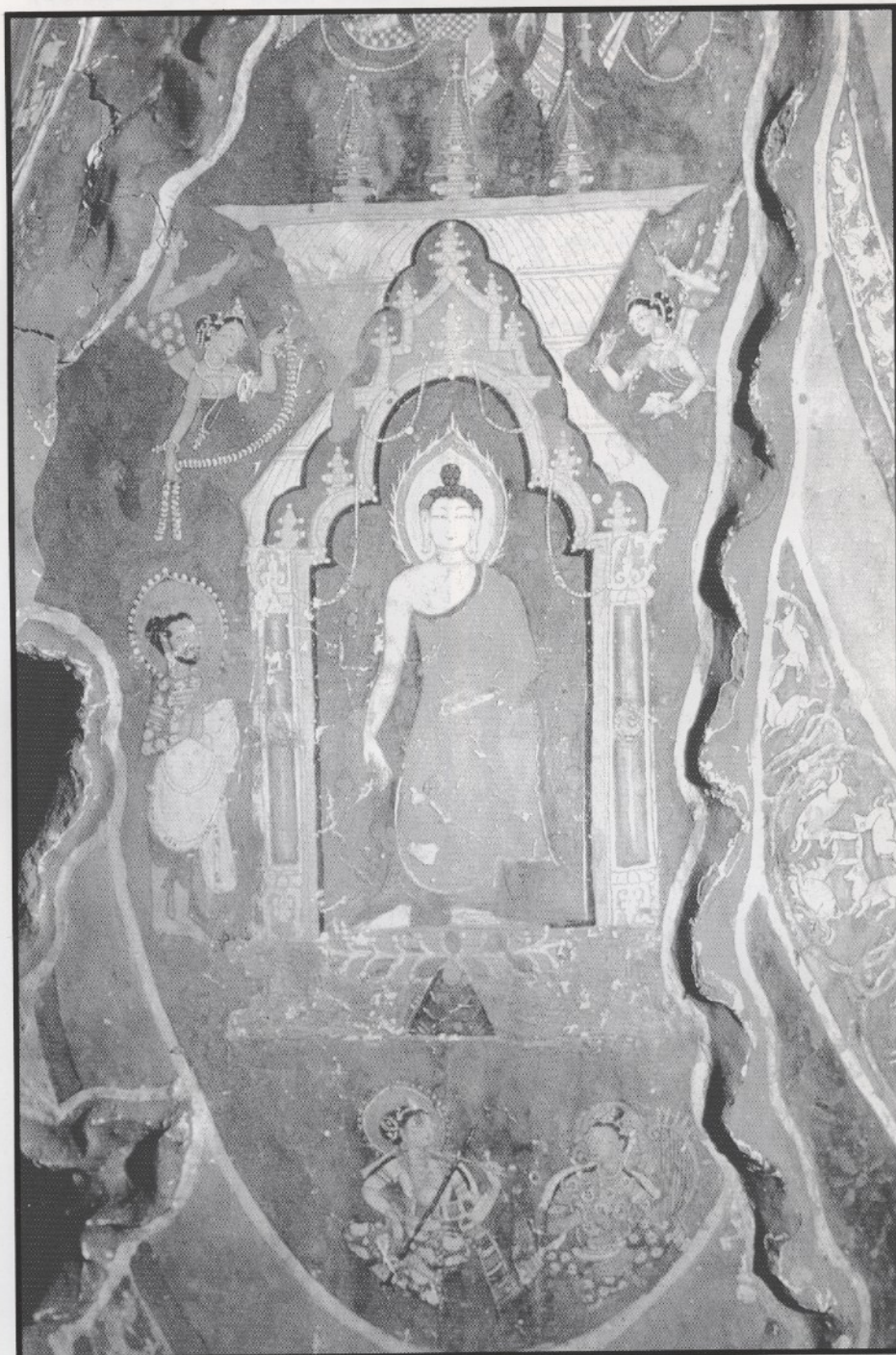


Figure 7: Lalitaditya's *Caitya* as depicted on the robes of an image in the gSum-brtsegs-lha-khang, Alchi village, Ladakh (India)

Sakyamuni, since both of these important beings are nominally in the center of the *caitya*. Thus, it is probable that they only represent non-specific or generalized Buddhas from the innumerable Buddha-worlds (Buddhaloka) that the Buddhist cosmology holds to be at every star in the universe.

Wars and other destructive forces (especially the Moslem raids and, later, conquests of the eleventh through thirteenth centuries) have destroyed all other "Great" Buddha images in the Indian sphere. The earliest such images were probably of stucco or unfired clay modelled over wooden armatures. Fragments of later images in these media exist at the famous Buddhist university site of Nalanda in Bihar state, and the techniques are still in use today in some of the Himalayan areas as the "true" or "correct" means of making "Great" Buddha images. One truly extraordinary image was made by Lalitaditya, king of Kashmir during the mid-eighth century in his religious center at Parihaspura. During his military conquests (actually devastating raids — he apparently had no intention of establishing local governments to rule the conquered lands) he caused to be carried to Kashmir literally most of the metal in North-central and Eastern India. From the copper he brought back, he had cast one of the largest metal images of the ancient world. Kalhana, the twelfth-century chronicler of Kashmir, estimated that the image weighed 84,000 tolas (about half a million pounds) and my own research on the image, based on proportional measurements of the foundations of the structure which housed the image, has provided an estimate that the image was about eighty feet tall. It was housed in a towering stone structure of square plan. The image had survived until Kalhana's time and in his chronicle of Kashmir, the *Rajatarangini*, he mentions having seen it. However, it did not survive the brutal Moslem onslaught of the late twelfth and

thirteenth centuries. Fortunately, we are not without nearly contemporaneous depictions of it. In a remote monastery at Alchi village in Ladakh, paintings from the mid-eleventh century survive to give a hint of its impressive appearance. Executed by artists from Kashmir who certainly would have known firsthand such a monument, the paintings are believed to give a fairly accurate rendering of the now-lost shrine (Figure 7). To a populace accustomed to wooden and brick structures seldom more than four stories tall, the towering edifice of stone with its monumental image must have been awesome indeed! One cannot help but hope that some of the negative merit Lalitaditya had accumulated by his raids in India were offset by the merit accrued from the making and dedicating of such an image.

Although the beginnings of Buddhist art are shrouded by "lost works by unknown artists," it is clear that many Buddhist movements have used works of art to communicate their soteriological concepts. Whether through technical meditations by the monks or through devotional practices by the laity, Buddhist art communicates specific concepts about individual salvation and at a level which is invariably appropriate to the level of understanding of the individual. In Buddhism there is no God, at least in the Judeo-Christian sense of the term. The Buddha, and all Buddhas, stand as teachers of the *Dharma*, a message of altruistic compassion, perfected knowledge and a relentless demand for effort on behalf of one's less fortunate brethren. The "Great" Buddha presents to the practitioner the Goal, the great being (*Mahasattva*) totally perfected for the benefit of others, which each must strive to become. □