

Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

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Gestalt theory and the guidance of the gaze in early Buddhist stupa reliefs

1. Introduction

Early Buddhist stupa reliefs from India, the Buddha's birthplace, are exceptional in several respects. Not only do they testify to great artistry and creativity, but some of them, namely the narrative reliefs, reproduce a chronological sequence; they narrate time passing. In the ancient Gandhara region, located in what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan, this has led to a unique innovation: The chronologically linear narration of the Buddha's biography in pictures (Filigenzi, 2003; Taddei, 2003). This is of interest insofar as an image, by its very nature, represents a specific moment in space, which makes it difficult to reproduce a continuous action. The written or spoken text, on the other hand, has the natural capacity for linear narration and doesn't know this problem¹.

These distinct qualities are also noticeable in the way we perceive these media. A text is not read with the same movement of the eye as an image. Although the simple distinction into a successive way of looking at the text and a simultaneous way of looking at the picture falls short, the differences are evident. When reading a text, our eyes follow the line given by the writing from one letter to the other, there is no alternative to this reading direction, we can at most skip parts. However, perceptual psychology, and Gestalt theory in particular, teaches us that the image also has ways of directing our gaze. In his work *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* Rudolf Arnheim, with reference to the findings of other researchers, shows that seeing is *a priori* not an arbitrary act, but "a creative activity of the human mind" (Arnheim, 1974, p. 46). The primary process of perception consists in the formation of perceptual concepts. It is not oriented to the details of an image, but to the features of the overall structure (Arnheim, 1974; Buswell, 1935). In this process, for example, similarly constructed objects establish a unity that makes it easier to perceive shapes that differ from them (Arnheim, 1974).

¹ European art history has been familiar with the problem above all since Lessing's *Laocoon*, in which he argues for the primacy of poetry over the visual arts as a response to Winckelmann and his idealistic account of Greek art, see e.g. Gombrich (1999).

As perceptual psychology has further shown, image viewing functions via reference points, i.e., points that convey information and at which the eye dwells (Arnheim, 1974; Buswell, 1935). The beholder jumps back and forth between these reference points; peripheral regions are only taken into account to a limited extent. Moreover, the course of the observation is slightly different for each person. In the following, I would like to use the example of Buddhist reliefs to show that the image nevertheless had the potential to provide a reading direction by relying on the perceptual-psychological strategies set out in Gestalt theory.

Early in cultural history, human perception also acquired an orientation, a “lateral asymmetry”². This development was shaped above all by the linear progression of writing. For eyes accustomed to scripts running from left to right, this means that images are also read in this direction: “Since a picture is ‘read’ from left to right, pictorial movement toward the right is perceived as being easier, requiring less effort. If, on the contrary, we see a rider traverse the picture from right to left, he seems to be overcoming more resistance, to be investing more effort, and therefore to be going more slowly. Artists prefer sometimes the one effect, sometimes the other.” (Arnheim, 1974, p. 35). In Buddhist stupa reliefs however, the lateral asymmetry is applied mainly in the opposite direction, i.e., from right to left. This is primarily due to the architectural and religious conditions under which the images were viewed. The reliefs were attached to religious monuments, the stupas, and were contemplated by the pilgrims during the ritual circumambulation (*pradakshina*). Mounted on the drum, the dome, or the railing of a stupa, the spatial and ritual specifications created concrete conditions for viewing the image; they channeled the gaze. The image was revealed little by little – depending on the size of the stupa – only in the movement of the viewer. As a result, these reliefs are mostly conceived in a linear way, they display a continuous narrative³. The ritual circumambulation of the stupa took place in a clockwise direction, which meant that the visitor walked and looked at the reliefs attached to the drum from right to left. The *pradakshinapatha* – the path of the *pradakshina* – was bounded on its right by the stupa drum and on its left by the *vedika*, the railing surrounding the stupa. In some cases, the *vedika* was also decorated with reliefs. The narrative images were usually on its inner side, which meant that a sequence of images was also presented to the left of the worshipper and passed from left to right.

² Arnheim (1974, p. 33): “Visually, lateral asymmetry manifests itself in an uneven distribution of weight and in a dynamic vector leading from the left to the right of the visual field.”

³ The term ‘continuous narrative’ was used by Schlingloff (1981, with reference to Franz Wickhoff) and Dehejia (1997) to describe the mode of visual narration used in early Buddhist reliefs. Technically, one would rather speak of ‘sequential narrative’, a subset of ‘continuous narrative’ that “like continuous narrative, contains the repeated appearance of the protagonists at different times and places; the distinction between the modes is compositional in nature, and revolves around the principle of enframement. [...] In sequential narrative [...] extrinsic criteria are used to demarcate temporal divisions. Scenes are separated from one another by a variety of compositional means, and generally each episode is contained within a separate frame.” (Dehejia, 1997, p. 20).

Thus, in the case of the stupa reliefs, the effects of lateral asymmetry are not primarily due to a conditioning of the brain (see Arnheim, 1974), but have external causes. However, in Gandhara, where the continuous narrative began, between the 3rd century BCE and the 3rd century CE, a script called Kharoshthi was used, which was read from right to left. It is likely that this shaped the lateral asymmetry accordingly and indirectly influenced the design of reliefs in other regions of India.

The specific conditions of form and content of these reliefs lead to an image structure that uses certain means to facilitate the viewer's reading. The result are recurring strategies of image composition, some of which will be examined in more detail below. Stupa reliefs from the Gandhara region almost exclusively depict scenes from the life of the Buddha. The narrative cycle begins usually with the birth of Siddhartha and ends with the death of Buddha Gautama. In other regions, the iconographic program is more varied, but usually includes sequences of the Buddha's life story. Considering that the reliefs were viewed during the ritual circumambulation of the stupa, the pilgrim walking around the images of the Buddha's life connected his (life)time with Buddhas; the two time-levels ran parallel. In addition, there are the transcendent aspects that go beyond time, see Filigenzi (2003). Taking into account the unfolding in space of this process at the same time, the path of the *pradakshina* was a multidimensional experience.

2. Reliefs

For my observations, I will limit myself to reliefs depicting the life of the Buddha from the regions of Gandhara and Andhra (South India, for the stupas of Amaravati and Kanaganahalli) with a rough dating into the 2nd – 3rd century of our time. This corresponds to the Kushana period for the northwest of the subcontinent and the last centuries of Satavahana rule in the south. In what follows, the expressions “running direction” and “reading direction” will be used in reference to the reliefs under discussion. The running direction of a relief results from its pictorial structure, which, as I will show, gives it a certain basic orientation, running either from right to left or from left to right. The reading direction does not necessarily have to correspond to the running direction. It is defined by the structural elements and reference points presented to the viewer, which direct the gaze, and does not always run in a straight line.

2.1 The ‘Great Departure’ and other figures in motion

Let's start with the moment when Siddhartha left the luxury life of the palace where he had grown up to dedicate himself to asceticism, the ‘Great Departure’. Many stupa reliefs depict this scene, which always consists of the same core elements, well visible in an example from Gandhara in the Swat Museum (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The 'Great Departure', Gandhara, Swat Museum CHPT-560. From Luczanits 2009, p. 203, Kat. Nr. 119b.

On the right of the picture, we see the horse Kanthaka striding to the left with the future Buddha on its back. Between the legs of the animal the *yakshas* are depicted, which according to legend carried Kanthaka out of the palace so that no noise should betray the secret departure. One of them has put the horse's right leg over his shoulder and seems to be literally pulling it forward. Siddhartha is always accompanied by his groom Chandaka, who walks here before him carrying the royal umbrella. All figures are orientated from right to left, that is, in the same direction as the viewer performing the *pradakshina*. The gaze has various points of reference and axes to follow. On the one hand, there are the heads of the two main characters, i. e. the Bodhisattva on the horse and Chandaka. A line of sight leads from the rider on the right to the servant on the left edge of the picture. The latter turns back and takes up the gaze, but at the same time moves to the left, in the running direction of the relief. Below, the back of the horse forms an ascending axis in the direction of orientation, which is taken up by the parasol and continued in a descending line. And finally, there is an ascending line between the *yaksha* on the right, visible only with his head, and the *yaksha* on the left, depicted with the whole body. The relief runs in a clear direction from right to left, and the viewer's gaze is guided by the structure of the image.

The relief described here is part of a votive stupa and therefore rather small and reduced to the essential protagonists. However, we can observe the same scene on numerous other stupa reliefs, for example on a relief placed on the drum of the Amaravati stupa, where it was part of the surrounding frieze (Fig. 2).

Here, the umbrella bearer is placed behind the prince and his horse, holding the royal umbrella above them on a long staff. The diagonal of the staff reinforces the



Fig. 2. The 'Great Departure', Amaravati, British Museum 1880,0709.112 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

dynamic to the left, an orientation that is also followed by all the other figures – among them Chandaka – surrounding the group. The scene is part of a sequence: To the right of the 'Great Departure' we can see Siddhartha still in the palace, seated on a throne and surrounded by his harem. In the scene following the 'Great departure', the Bodhisattva is sitting on a throne again. He has arrived in the place of his exile and has to take leave of his horse and his groom. Chandaka is shown kneeling at the bottom to the right of the prince, his hands raised in adoration. The horse stands behind the throne and is turned to the right (although looking back at his master), the direction of his imminent return to the palace.

On the roundel of a railing pillar from the stupa of Amaravati, however, Siddhartha rides from left to right (Fig. 3). The reliefs attached to the inside of the railing were on the left side of the *pradakshinapatha* and were viewed from left to right when bypassed. The rider's orientation therefore is in the opposite direction.

Also with other figures or groups of figures which are in motion, the direction of movement is as a rule from right to left, thus parallel to the viewer. On the drum of a small stupa from Gandhara are several scenes with moving figures. The cycle of eight reliefs depicts the events of the Bodhisattva's first years of life. After the scenes of his birth, two pictures show the return of the royal family to their home city of Kapilavastu (Fig. 4).

The procession is led by an elephant carrying a palanquin, behind which follows a chariot drawn by two lions. In the image adjoining it on the right there is a rider and a chariot pulled by two horses. All animals move from right to left. After the 'Interpretation of the Bodhisattva's physical characteristics' which consists of seated persons, we can see how little Siddhartha rides to school on a ram (not depicted in Fig. 4). He appears at the right end of the relief and moves to the left towards his teacher.

The stupa drum is only 7.5 cm high and has a diameter of 39.5 cm. With these dimensions, it was hardly possible to view the reliefs while walking around them. However, despite the smallness of the figures, a general orientation from right to left is clearly visible.



Fig. 3. The 'Great Departure', Amaravati, British Museum 1880,0709.7 © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Fig. 4. Stupa drum, Gandhara, Chakdara, Dir Museum CHPT-764. From Luczanits 2009, p. 204, Kat. Nr. 121.

Under these conditions, the orientation of the depicted people and animals also has a symbolic meaning: not only the pilgrims went around the stupas clockwise, but also the figures of the reliefs themselves (see Filigenzi, 2003).

2.2 *The Mahaparinirvana*

The scene of the deceased Buddha on his deathbed is known mainly from Gandhara and always follows the same iconographic scheme: the Buddha is depicted lying on a bed on his right side, his feet on the right and his head, which is bedded on a pillow, on the left, with his right hand underneath. His body thus

forms a diagonal ascending from right to left, which is usually reinforced by the arrangement of the surrounding figures. This becomes particularly clear in a relief in the British Museum (Fig. 5).

To the right of the bed two standing figures are depicted, behind them is a tree that fills the upper right corner of the relief with its crown. Corresponding to it on the left side of the relief is another tree. In front of this tree and thus to the left of the bed are also two persons, the one on the far left is Vajrapani, Buddha's faithful companion. He has raised his right arm above his head. Between these two framing groups two further structural diagonals can be made out: 1. Below the deathbed are two seated monks, the one on the left is raising his upper body toward the monk standing to the left of the Buddha and is looking upward. With the left leg stretched out backwards, his body forms an ascending line that continues in the line of sight between the two monks. 2. Behind the reclining Buddha, a succession of four mourners forms a diagonal line parallel to the Buddha's body; the third figure has his arms joined behind his head, the fourth stretches them skyward. The multiple and almost identical repetition of the same figure immediately one after the other results in what Rudolf Arnheim calls a "stroboscopic motion" (Arnheim, 1974). We have the impression of seeing the same person in a sequence of movements, in this case gestures of grief and despair.

The viewer's gaze, coming from the right, is thus directed along the body of the deceased, rising slightly to his head, the center of the scene. In addition, above



Fig. 5. Mahaparinirvana, Gandhara, British Museum 1913,1108.17 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

and below this central axis, two more lines point in the same direction. Other representations of the Mahāparinirvāṇa are structured in the same or a similar way (for example, SMB Museum für Asiatische Kunst I 80).

Interesting at this point is the comparison with Etruscan cinerary urns from the 2nd century BCE. The sculptured urn lid shows the reclining deceased with the feet on the left edge and the upper body propped up on a pillow on the right, the person always lying on his or her left side. At the same time, the mythological scenes depicted on the urn box usually have a clear running direction, from left to right. An example in Leiden (Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden H III) shows a scene from the *Odyssey*; Odysseus is fighting Polyphemus, the ship with his men has already started moving to leave the island – it is sailing to the right while the men are looking back at the fight. An urn in Berlin shows the murder of Troilus by Achilles on the urn body (SMB Antikensammlung SK 1289; 1290). Troilus rides to the right fleeing from Achilles, who has grabbed him by the hair. Other specimens bear an inscription on the edge of the lid, automatically giving the reading direction from left to right.

Based on these observations, it seems justified to assume that a reclining person is normally depicted starting at the feet and the gaze is directed along the body towards the head. Depending on the running direction of an image, this leads to a corresponding orientation of the person.

2.3 *Maya's dream*

The images depicting the dream of the queen Maya also show us a reclining person, the sleeping mother of the future Buddha who dreams of a white elephant – the future Buddha – entering her body. However, her position is exactly the opposite of that of the Buddha in Parinirvāṇa and thus at first glance contradicts the hypothesis established above. Maya always lies on the left side of her body because the elephant in her dream enters her right side, at the same place where the little Bodhisattva comes out at birth⁴. Therefore, the correct representation of this fact led many artists to depict the queen with her head on the right side. This is unsatisfactory for the structure of the image, the viewer coming from the right cannot be guided properly in his gaze. The example selected here (Fig. 6) is a typical representation of the scene from Gandhara.

The picture is dominated by the bed executed in detail in the foreground and Maya sleeping on it. She is lying on her left side, so her head, which is bedded on a pillow, can be seen at the right end of the bed. She has put her left hand under

⁴ The right side being the good one, the Bodhisattva must enter and exit through this side. In the text sources Maya apparently also lies on her right side, see Zin (2015); Schlingloff (2011) – a contradiction that can't be left unsolved by the picture. For the same reason, the Buddha lies on his right side in Mahāparinirvāṇa.



Fig. 6. Maya's dream, Gandhara, Metropolitan Museum 1976.402. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/38117>.

her left cheek, with her right arm she supports herself on the edge of the bed. Behind the bed are four persons – two guards and two servants –, a group of two each on the left and on the right. Between them, in the central axis of the image, hangs the round disc with the elephant heading towards the woman's upper body⁵. The structure of the image makes the gaze swing back and forth between Maya's head and the elephant, which hovers centrally over the sleeping woman.

However, there are also depictions of the scene that have found a way to avoid this problem. One example is the dome slab in Kanaganahalli, where Maya is depicted lying on her stomach with her feet on the right side and her head on the left (Zin, 2018, p. 9). Her posture, despite the fragmented state of the relief, is easily recognizable, especially in the depiction of her feet and head. The queen has placed her right arm over her head, which is turned to the left, toward the viewer. Unlike the canonical examples of the motif, this variant – as far as it can be reconstructed – leads to a pictorial structure corresponding to the one of the Parinirvana: an ascending diagonal leads the gaze from the feet depicted on the right to the head and the elephant in the upper left corner of the image, ready to enter her right side.

⁵ Due to the poor preservation of the relief in this area, it is not possible to say for certain whether the elephant was worked in relief or painted on. In other examples from Gandhara, the elephant is depicted in relief and almost touches Maya's body with its trunk, e. g. SMB Museum für Asiatische Kunst I 63.



Fig. 7. Maya's dream, Gandhara, Chakdara, Dir Museum DMC 710. <https://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/manifest/iiif/1730311/manifest.json>.

Maya's dream is also depicted on the already mentioned stupa drum from Gandhara (Fig. 4, the scene is not visible). Here, the artist has found a particularly original solution in order not to interrupt the reading direction of the series of reliefs: The sleeping Maya is shown in a back view. This seems to have been a well-known strategy, because the same iconographic variant is also found on other reliefs in Chakdara (Fig. 7).

The queen is lying on her bed facing away from the viewer, her slightly drawn legs on the right edge and her upper body on the left. The bed is flanked by two guards. Instead of the face, only the tied hair is visible, covering also the neck and part of the back. The line of the lower legs leads to the disc with the elephant above the bed, which in turn reaches down to Maya's upper body. The inverted position of the reclining queen facilitates the guidance of the gaze from the feet over the elephant to the head of the woman.

2.4 The Birth Scene

The dream scene is usually followed by the scene of the birth of the Bodhisattva, one of the most frequently depicted episodes from the life of the Buddha. The structure of the image follows an unchanging scheme, the elements of which are also found in the written sources: The future Buddha is born by emerging from his mother's right side (Stoye, 2008). Maya is always depicted standing, in the posture of a tree nymph, holding onto a branch with one hand. To her left are usually one or more attendants, who assist her in childbirth. To her right are several divine figures who receive the newborn with a cloth, on which it then takes its first steps. In the aniconic examples, the child itself is not represented, but is symbolized by

the footprints on the cloth. In the iconic ones – i.e., usually those from Gandhara – it protrudes with its upper body in a lateral diagonal from the right side of the mother. This is the case on a relief in the Peshawar Museum (Fig. 8).

Maya is the largest figure in this scene and forms its central axis. To her right stands a woman, probably her sister Mahaprajapati, embracing her with both arms. Next to her we see a servant with a water jug and a palm frond. On the right edge of the relief stands a deity with a high turban. His hands, joined in *anjali*, point to the action in the center, as does Mahaprajapati's arm, which not only supports the sister but leads to the figure of the child, whose upper body emerges from the queen's right side at a 45° angle. His orientation is to the left, towards Indra who faces him and receives him with a cloth. Behind Indra stands Brahma, recognizable by the *kamandalu* in his left hand. In the background the vegetation of the grove of Lumbini is to be recognized, above on the left musical instruments hang in the trees.

All known examples from Gandhara follow this structure and show an in the core identical image structure (Stoye, 2008). The birth scenes from Andhra share with them the essential iconographic elements but have their own characteristics. In Kanaganahalli, the birth of the Buddha is depicted as part of a group of three slabs reaching across the entire platform (Fig. 9).

Maya is standing on the right side of the picture with her left arm raised above her head to grasp a branch. With the hand of her right, bent arm, she is grasping



Fig. 8. Birth scene, Gandhara, Peshawar Museum PM-2725. From Luczanits 2009, 217, Kat. Nr. 147.

her earring. Thus the exit from her right side is formally blocked⁶. Nevertheless, at the height of the right hand a cloth held by four divine figures connects in a long diagonal leading down to the left. On the cloth Siddhartha makes his first steps which are recorded below on the relief pedestal together with an explanatory inscription (see Zin, 2018, p. 66). However, the little Bodhisattva is not pictorially represented. It is an invisible movement that runs from top right to bottom left.

Quite similarly constructed is the birth scene on a slab from Amaravati, whereby here four scenes, all aniconic, are combined in two registers: dream, dream interpretation, birth and appearance before the local deity (Fig. 10).

The representation of the dream scene – the elephant was probably painted on the surface – is conventionally structured, but better incorporated into the flow of the reading. The descending diagonal of the sleeping queen leads into the scene of the dream interpretation adjoining on the left. From here, various axes such as the bodies forming a circle open to the lower left or the lower legs of the seated men lead to the figure of Maya in the birth scene shown below right. The cloth held by the four divine figures horizontally to the left shows us the way to the adjoining picture in which Siddhartha is presented to the local deity (*yaksha*). In



Fig. 9. Birth scene, Kanaganahalli. Picture by author.

⁶ Rhie Quintanilla (2017) therefore interprets the scene not as the birth itself, but just as the 'Seven first steps'. Only the later added inscription causes, in her opinion, the interpretation as the birth scene. However, on an iconographic level, the two moments are difficult to separate, especially in aniconic images.



Fig. 10. Birth scene, Amaravati, British Museum 1880,0709.44 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

this image composition, the gaze is still guided in a main sequence from right to left, but via an inverted z-shaped detour.

The birth scene, like the dream scene, thus has concrete formal specifications: The right side of the standing mother must be visible and the direction in which the child comes out and takes its first steps on the cloth must – for both logical and chronological reasons – follow on the left, i.e., the reading direction.

2.5 The Taming of the Elephant

Other scenes from the life of the Buddha were subject to less iconographic specifications and therefore their structure was easier to adapt to the running direction of a relief. This becomes clear, for example, in two reliefs depicting the taming of the elephant Nalagiri by the Buddha.



Fig. 11. The Taming of the elephant, Amaravati, British Museum 1880,0709.90 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

On a relief from a drum frieze panel of the Amaravati stupa (Fig. 11), the Buddha is standing in the way of the wild elephant.

The sequence of the scene is, according to the attachment of the slab, from right to left. The elephant comes out of a building at the right end and rushes into a startled crowd. Further to the left, he is seen again, this time standing directly in front of the Buddha, who brings him to a halt and tames him with a gesture of his hand: the elephant has gone down on his knees with his front legs, the front part of his body forming a sloping diagonal. The repetition of the main figure, typical of the continuous mode of representation (Dehejia, 1997; Schlingloff, 1981), ensures the coherence of the narrative; the sequence runs parallel to the viewer from right to left.

A roundel from the railing of the Amaravati stupa also shows the scene (Fig. 12).

Since less space is available, the two phases of the animal's behavior are depicted directly behind each other. Here, however, the enraged elephant storms from the left side to the right, since the roundel was placed on the inside of the railing and thus to the left of the viewer. The elephant's body rears up in an ascending diagonal, surrounded by the frightened townspeople. Immediately afterwards we see it a second time, this time with its body bent forward. The forehead seems to be at the feet of the unfortunately cut off Buddha, who must have stood at the far-right edge of the relief. As in figure 5, the immediate repetition of the elephant has a stroboscopic effect and creates the impression of motion. The two representations of the elephant completely fill the lower segment of the circle, the ascending line of the first culminating in its skull, from where a descending diagonal starts. It goes on from the base of its trunk over the upper body of the second elephant, which lies exactly in the axis of this line. These axes are repeated by the human figures behind them. A woman holds on to another person and



Fig. 12. The taming of the Elephant, Amaravati, Madras Government Museum. Photo by John C. Huntington, Courtesy of the John C. and Susan L. Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art.

extends with her body the diagonal of the first elephant to the upper right. Below this group, another person has raised his or her arms, probably in jubilation over the appeased elephant, directing the viewer's gaze to the climax of the scene, which takes place in the lower right of the relief. The monks lined up along the right edge also have this effect. The combination of ascending and descending lines not only guides the eye, but also underlines the course of the increasing and decreasing tension.

3. Perceptual patterns

The reliefs attached to the early Buddhist stupas of India had various means of pictorial composition to allow the visitor a continuous contemplation of the imagery during the *pradakshina*. Gestalt theory enables us to recognize the perceptual patterns involved and to understand how they work. A frequent instrument are reference points, usually consisting of central motifs or elements that

draw the eye. The most important example of this is the figure of the Buddha. He is often depicted slightly larger than the other figures and easy to identify because of the nimbus. Reference points can also be prominently placed objects such as the royal umbrella in the 'Great departure' scene (Figs. 1-3) or the small elephant hovering over the sleeping Maya (Figs. 6,7). The eye is often drawn to things that stand out from the surrounding objects because of their shape. This can be seen in the tree in Fig. 10 or the elephants in Fig. 12. The circular shape of the tree in Fig. 10 forms the beginning and the end of the lower register. The bed on which Maya is lying in the dream scene shown above right seems to repeat the round shape of the tree. By perceiving this combination of similar shapes, the viewer is given the corner points of the relief. The same applies to different shapes that join to form larger units, as can be seen in the human bodies in Fig. 11, against which the two elephants clearly stand out and combine.

In addition, the alignment and placement of the figures and objects, following the lateral asymmetry described by Arnheim, creates a network of lines and references that channel and direct the gaze. These can be lines of sight between two figures, as in the example of the 'Great Departure' (Fig. 1), or lines formed by animal or human bodies. This is particularly clear in the example of the reclining Buddha in the Mahaparinirvana, where the entire body forms an ascending diagonal that is multiplied in the foreground and background by further lines running through the figures' bodies (Fig. 5). Often, however, an arm stretched in one direction, like that of Mahaprajapati in Fig. 8, or legs depicted at a certain angle, as seen, for example, in the scene at the upper left of Fig. 10, is sufficient. Objects such as the cloth on which the Bodhisattva takes his first steps (Figs. 8-10) or the stick of the royal umbrella (Figs. 1-3) also belong to these structuring lines, which can be visible or invisible as in the case of eye contact.

Within the structure of the image the representation of motion takes place. It becomes directly visible through the figures which move in a certain direction (Figs. 1-4). People and animals walk almost without exception from right to left and thus in the same direction as the viewer. The latter goes along with the depicted orientation, he moves out of the palace parallel to the Bodhisattva and also moves away in the same direction as the first steps of the newborn child do. The protagonists of the images mirror the movement of the pilgrims, both perform the same circumambulation of the stupa.

An important difference to Arnheim's formulation here, however, is that the lateral asymmetry was not a visual habit shaped by the customary script but was determined by the specific architectural and religious conditions of viewing the image – even if in Gandhara, a right-to-left script was actually used, which certainly brought about a corresponding alignment of visual habits. However, the main condition for reading the reliefs in this direction was given by the ritual

requirements. The viewer looked at the images from right to left, which means that, conversely, movement from *right to left* is perceived as “easier and more effortless”, especially since it also corresponded to the movement of the viewer. On the other hand, reliefs attached to the inside of the railing, as they were common in Andhra, run from left to right – thus also parallel to the viewer – and adapt the image structure to this reading direction: Siddhartha and his horse move from left to right on the roundel of the railing from Amaravati (Fig. 3). The same is the case with the diagonal. Depending on the direction in which the reliefs run, it is seen as ascending if it runs from the lower right to the upper left, and as descending in the opposite case⁷. The diagonal is an important means of reinforcing the representation of movement. It automatically evokes a dynamic: “Oblique orientation is probably the most elementary and effective means of obtaining directed tension. Obliqueness is perceived spontaneously as a dynamic straining toward or away from the basic spatial framework of the vertical and horizontal.” (Arnheim, 1974, pp. 424–425; see also Gombrich, 1999). This is well illustrated by the diagonal of the royal umbrella in the scenes of the ‘Great departure’. If the bearer of the umbrella stands behind the horse, as in Fig. 2, the umbrella supports the forward movement of rider and animal by rising from right to left; if the umbrella is in front of the Bodhisattva, as in Fig. 1, it represents their continuation with a line leading away from the center, from the upper right to the lower left. The opposite is true for the relief from the railing (Fig. 3), likewise for the ascending and descending lines of the elephant in Fig. 12, as these images run from left to right.

The elephants in Fig. 11 are a good example to show that the repetition of only slightly different objects in an image leads under certain conditions to the perception of movement. This is the case even more directly due to the stroboscopic effect in Fig. 12. Even though it may seem obvious, it can be stated that it is the gaze that actively creates motion within the picture. This is most clearly illustrated by the example of a film reel played before our eyes. When viewing the stupa reliefs, it is not the images but the viewer who moves, albeit much too slowly to allow the frieze to become a filmstrip. Or as Gombrich (1999, p. 45) puts it: “For we are not cameras but rather slow-registering instruments which cannot take in much at a time.” And later on (Gombrich, 1999, p. 51): “In other words, the impression of movement, like the illusion of space, is the result of a complex process which is best described by the familiar term of reading an image.” This also means that the viewer goes with time, from *before* to *after*. As said in the beginning, the pilgrims experience the time level when walking along the images, *realiter* in their

⁷ The opposite is true for images directed at viewers accustomed to reading from the left to the right or for reliefs attached to the railing of the stupa (Arnheim, 1974, with reference to the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin).

lives and virtually for the life of the Buddha. The stupa reliefs are images that extend not only in space, but also in time.

With the “directed sequence of represented moments” (Giuliani, 2002, p. 166) the image thus brings its structure into line with the written text; the viewer’s gaze is supposed to glide over the reliefs like over a scroll and be led to the decisive information. The point here is not that an image must be structured according to predetermined rules, but rather that the gaze is guided with the help of the discussed strategies of image composition. The stupa reliefs, as long as they follow the linear narration, have a clear running direction, depending on their placement within the architectural superstructure. The direction of reading, on the other hand, is subject to loops and detours, especially on the multi-register reliefs of Andhra. On the relief from Amaravati with the scenes around the birth of the Bodhisattva (Fig. 10), the viewer’s gaze is led on an inverted z-shaped line through all the sequences and then on to the relief adjoining on the left. From such examples it becomes clear that the ideal guidance of the gaze also depended on the skills and creativity of the artist. Many elements are based on traditional visual codes and standardized motifs that have been passed on in a fixed form (Filigenzi, 2005; Stoye, 2008; Voegtler, 2020). Nevertheless, innovative examples such as the depiction of Maya’s dream (Fig. 7) or the optimal placing of the umbrella in the ‘Great departure’ (Figs. 1-3) show that certain artists or studios found their own ways to optimize the readability of their reliefs through the intuitive consideration of perceptual patterns.

Summary

Buddhist stupa reliefs, with their specific placement in architectural space, create unique conditions for their viewing. They were attached to religious monuments (stupas) and were looked at during the ritual of circumambulation. This article examines how various strategies of image composition were used to optimize the readability of narrative images and enable the perception of a chronological flow. As a close examination of the pictorial structure shows, the strategies set out in Gestalt theory are also applied in images that were viewed under circumstances contrary to Western habits. The examples discussed, showing scenes from the life of the Buddha, were subject to different conditions of viewing and a different art-historical background but followed the same perceptual-psychological imprint.

Keywords: India, Early Buddhist art, narrative images, strategies of image composition, readability.

Zusammenfassung

Buddhistische Stupa-Reliefs schaffen durch ihre besondere Platzierung im architektonischen Raum einzigartige Bedingungen für ihre Betrachtung. Sie waren an religiösen Monumenten (Stupas) angebracht und wurden während deren rituellen Umrundung betrachtet. In diesem Artikel wird untersucht, wie verschiedene Strategien der Bildkomposition eingesetzt wurden, um die Lesbarkeit der narrativen Bilder zu

optimieren und die Wahrnehmung eines chronologischen Flusses zu ermöglichen. Wie die nähere Betrachtung der Bildstruktur zeigt, finden die in der Gestalttheorie dargelegten Strategien auch in Bildern Anwendung, die unter westlichen Sehgewohnheiten entgegenlaufenden Bedingungen betrachtet wurden. Die hier besprochenen Beispiele, die Szenen aus dem Leben des Buddha zeigen, stammen aus einem anderen kulturhistorischen Kontext und folgen doch der gleichen wahrnehmungspsychologischen Prägung.

Schlüsselwörter: Indien, frühe buddhistische Kunst, narrative Bilder, Strategien der Bildkomposition, Lesbarkeit.

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