

# Aniconism and the multivalence of emblems

[Religion](#)



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

ASIAN ART HISTORY Buddha is a religious figure who has inspired hundreds of millions of people to lead a better, more contemplative life. But the early years of Buddhism remain shrouded in mystery. Why is that he does not appear in the early images of Buddhist art? What motivated people to avoid displaying his image? Two historians—Susan Huntington and Vidya Dehejia—have interesting perspectives on this issue which I will briefly explore. The intentional lack of an image of a religious figure is known as aniconism. There are many reasons why followers may not display the image of their deity or prophet. In some cases they believe it is sacrilegious. Some Buddhists may have believed that Buddha was egoless and should therefore not be depicted as an individual. Huntington has her own view on this question. She believes that many of the images associated with Buddha's absence—such as an empty throne—are in fact intended to mean something else. The empty throne, for example, was intended to represent the “ sacred nuclei of worship” at religious sites and not the fact of Buddha's absence on that throne (Huntington, 402). Her new research suggests that inscriptions on these images indicate that many of the so-called aniconistic images are more quotidian representations of sacred sites. Vidya Dehejia has a different view of these questions. He believes that scholars have overlooked the double-meanings of many words in the ancient scripts. He thinks that someone like Huntington has been too literal. He admits that some aniconistic scholars have gone too far in their interpretations, but that some images do indeed depict the absence of Buddha. He suggests that the emblems of many images “ may carry different meanings in varying contexts” and that scholars should be sensitive to this (Dehejia, 64). The debate over the absence or presence of Buddha in early Buddhist art is a fascinating one.

<https://assignbuster.com/aniconism-and-the-multivalence-of-emblems/>

Both scholars present convincing arguments. Whether we will ever know the truth remains an open question. Work consulted Dehejia, Vidya. "Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems." *Ars Orientalis*, Vol. 21 (1991), pp. 45-66  
Huntington, Susan. "Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism." *Art Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 4, *New Approaches to South Asian Art* (Winter, 1990), pp. 401-408