

“ways of seeing” first paper assignment: visual analysis essay by dang mai trang

[Religion](#), [Buddhism](#)



" Ways of Seeing" First Paper Assignment: Visual Analysis Essay by Dang Mai Trang September 2012 Buddhism is one of the oldest and major world religions with many different phases, numerous sects and layers of art. Buddhism began in India around the 6th century BCE. The oldest Buddhist religious monuments are believed to be stupas in India, which contain Buddha's relics after his parinirvana. One of them is the Bharhut stupa from the 1st century BCE. It contains various stories carved on large columns and crossbars about the Buddha's previous lives and Buddha's life events. The carvings exhibit the early Buddhist art style known as aniconism, in which the Buddha is only depicted through symbols. This essay will analyze one of those carvings inscribed " Bhagavato sakamunino bodho. " Its composition shows an elaborate temple enshrining the bodhi tree of Sakyamuni¹ with hybrid creatures and worshippers around; the Buddha is depicted through the bodhi tree, the triratana and the pedestal for offering. Based on how carefully and significantly the tree is depicted, how the composition of the carving revolves around it and how the content in the carving celebrates it, the tree - representing the Buddha - stands out to be the main subject in the relief. The bodhi tree - where the Buddha achieved enlightenment - appears to be the main subject of the carving by how large and detailed it is depicted. This old tree has strong and big trunk protruding upright and large and round foliage. Its leaves have a heart-like shape, a very distinct feature of the bodhi tree. The tree looks full of life with layers and layers of smooth and large leaves; their veins are meticulously carved in. The garlands that hang on the branches are also depicted very carefully and naturally. To form the knitwearlike texture, many dots are carved into lines along the garlands.

In real life, the tree is bigger 1 Susan Huntington, " Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism, " Art Journal 49 (1990), 403. 1 " Ways of Seeing" September 2012 than everything in the relief. However, despite the real-life sizes, in hierarchic scale the more important ones are depicted bigger than the less significant ones. If the tree is not important, it will not be depicted as large but instead will be, for example, even smaller than a human being. For instance, in the carving " Birth of Buddha"2, Queen Maya is depicted larger than the tree she holds on when giving birth to the Buddha. Nevertheless, in the relief, the tree positions in the middle and occupies a large space: about half of the upper section. Through how meticulously the tree is portrayed and how enormously the tree is depicted, it can be concluded that the tree is extremely significant in this relief. The bodhi tree depicted in the carving is important not only because it is a sacred tree where Buddha achieved his enlightenment but also it represents the Buddha, supported by the composition of the relief. The carving is visually divided into two parts by the railing of the shrine. In the upper section, the bodhi tree is surrounded by the open-air shrine. In the lower section, beneath the tree and the railing, the pedestal for offering is surmounted by two triratanas3. The pedestal for offering, the triratana and the bodhi tree are aniconic emblems in the relief that believed to represent the presence of the enlightened Buddha. 4 Nevertheless, the composition of this carving suggests that every other emblem is here to emphasize the significance of the bodhi tree. The tree is placed on top of everything and is embraced by the natural curve of the railing. The tree trunk extends to the bottom part, cuts through the railing, stays right in the middle of the carving with the two triratanas at two sides,

forms with them a triangular shape. The triad composition together with the similar shape between the tree and the triratana suggest that the tree could be the third triratana, which represents the Buddha. There are two kinnaras, half human and half-bird creatures, flying in the two upper corners. Right below the kinnaras there stand two gigantic human figures. The architecture façade has two doors in the middle and extends both sides like mirror images. In the lower section, two 2 3 Vidya Dehejia, " Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems, " *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1992), 60. Ibid., 50. 4 Ibid. 2 " Ways of Seeing" September 2012 standing figures and two kneeling figures are balanced around the pedestal and the tree trunk. In short, the relief is symmetrical as every element has its own counterpart, except for an elephant-crowned column that rises from the lower panel. 5 The open-air shrine allows sunlight to shine on the tree. The tree, embraced and uplifted by the architecture, is metaphorically associated with the moment the Buddha achieved the enlightenment under the bodhi tree. Together with the large and detailed depiction, the composition of the carving revolving around the tree and placing it as the central focus - further enhances the significance of the bodhi tree and possibly suggests a greater meaning behind it. The importance of the bodhi tree is seen not only through the composition but also through the content of the carving. The flying kinnaras are hanging the garlands over the tree as an act of decoration to show their appreciation. Two gigantic human figures standing at both sides of the tree seem to be the guardians protecting the sacred tree. Below, two kneeling figures, a man on the left and a woman on the right, as well as a man standing on the right, are worshipping and offering flowers to the tree. It is

arguable that the flowers appear like decorated details on a panel but in this piece, various types of flower are depicted, not in any repetitious pattern like on the railing and the columns of the shrine. Thus, the flowers are the real objects offered to the tree, not some decorative patterns. A female figure on the left with large breasts displays a sinuous pose. She holds a fly-whisk and wears a hip-belt. Unlike other male figures, her headwear does not have a big cloth knot in the front. From the depiction, she could be Yakshi - a female earth spirit accepted as a symbol of fertility in Buddhism - whose images are commonly seen in the stupas at Bharhut and Sanchi. On the railing, there are ornamentations of smaller female figures similar to Yakshi. All of them are in the Tribhanga posture, a standing body position used in the traditional Indian art and dance, as if they are dancing to celebrate an event and to welcome somebody very important. 5 Ibid., 51. 3 “ Ways of Seeing” September 2012

These female figures are probably ornamentation on the wall of the shrine because ornament is necessary to any architecture, especially the sacred one, in order to make the viewers feel connected with the place. Through many activities around the tree described in the relief including worshipping by lay devotees, protecting by gigantic guardians, visiting and celebrating by the kinnaras and ornamentation of Yakshi and the dancers - it again signifies the importance of the tree with a deeper implication: the representation of Buddha. Some scholars believe that the inscription on the carving should be translated as “ The Bodhi Tree of Sakyamuni Buddha”⁶ while others think that it should be the “ Enlightenment of the Holy One Sakyamuni. ”⁷ Despite which interpretation we accept, the name of the relief does not change how visually the tree should be perceived: It is depicted enormously and

meticulously in the center, embraced and uplifted by the sacred shrine. Furthermore, the tree is highly regarded by the kinnaras and the guardians, loyally worshipped by the lay devotees and enthusiastically celebrated by ornamentation of Yakshi and the dancers. Therefore, whether the event portrayed is or is not the actual enlightenment⁸, there is one thing to be sure about: the tree, more than just being a sacred one under which the Buddha became enlightened, is the representation the Buddha in this relief.

Bibliography 1. Huntington, Susan L. “ Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism”. *Art Journal* 49 (1990): 401-408. 2. Dehejia, Vidya. “ Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems”. *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1991): 45-66. Susan Huntington, “ Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism, ” *Art Journal* 49 (1990), 403. Vidya Dehejia, “ Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems, ” *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1992), 50. 8 See Susan Huntington, “ Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism, ” *Art Journal* 49 (1990), 401-07 and Vidya Dehejia, “ Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems, ” *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1992), 45-64 for the debate. 7 6 4