

# *A Study on the Multicultural Presentation in the Yungang Grottoes Sculptures*

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**Abstract.** This study examines the themes, visual forms, and narrative content of Buddhist sculptures in the Yungang Grottoes through a multicultural lens. Focusing on their Northern Wei context, it argues that Yungang provides a concrete case of how Buddhist art was negotiated as it traveled into China along the Silk Road. As Buddhism took root locally, sculptors drew on multiple artistic repertoires—most visibly Gandharan conventions, elements traceable to Greco-Roman traditions, and styles associated with the Central Plains—yet reworked them to suit emerging Chinese religious and esthetic needs. The resulting "Yungang style" can be seen not only in garments, facial modeling, and carving methods, but also in the way Buddhist doctrines were translated into locally legible visual language. In particular, the grotto narratives invite comparison across religious traditions: certain Yungang story scenes echo broader patterns of sacred storytelling, including compositional affinities with motifs such as the Christian Annunciation. By mapping these layered influences, the paper highlights Yungang as a site where cultural contact became artistic synthesis rather than simple borrowing.

**Keywords:** Yungang Grottoes, Buddhist art, multicultural perspective, Gandharan style, cultural integration

## **1. Introduction**

As one of the three major world religions, Buddhism has a long historical trajectory that begins in India around the sixth century BCE. The social landscape of this period—often described as an age of competing regional states—was shaped by expanding agriculture and the economic growth that followed. Yet prosperity did not translate into social flexibility. Instead, the entrenched caste order intensified tensions. In particular, the rising economic weight of the Vaishya class challenged the ideological and political authority of the Brahmins, who occupied the position of "orthodox" aristocracy [1]. Efforts by Brahmin elites to reaffirm caste boundaries and restrict mobility, rather than stabilizing society, deepened resentment among Vaishyas and Shudras. It was in this climate of contestation that new religious movements multiplied, with Buddhism eventually emerging as the most durable and wide-reaching among them.

The formation of Buddhist art followed a related but not identical path. While Buddhism was established early, its visual culture took shape more gradually. Early communities maintained reservations about idol worship, which delayed the appearance of anthropomorphic images and meant that large-scale sculptural practice did not flourish until roughly the fourth century BCE. A decisive shift occurred when Alexander the Great's campaigns brought parts of India into the Hellenistic

political sphere [2]. Along with new regimes came artisans and craft knowledge, and Greek sculptural conventions began to circulate within local workshops. Against this backdrop, early Buddhist imagery developed through a productive negotiation between imported techniques and indigenous themes, most clearly seen in the Gandhara and Mathura traditions. Gandhara art, generally considered the earlier of the two, adopted Hellenistic visual vocabularies with unusual consistency, offering a recognizable synthesis of Indian religious content and Greek-derived esthetics [2]. Mathura art, emerging slightly later, drew on Gandharan precedents yet moved toward a more localized idiom.

With the opening of the Silk Road, these artistic lineages traveled eastward and became part of the visual resources for Chinese Buddhist art. Traces of such influence appear across a wide geographic arc—from the Kizil and Bezeklik caves in Xinjiang to the Mogao caves at Dunhuang, the Dazu rock carvings in Chongqing, and eventually the Yungang Grottoes in Shanxi. Each site, however, reinterpreted these sources in its own way, producing distinct regional styles. Focusing on Yungang—one of China's four major grotto complexes—this study examines the themes, visual forms, and narrative content of its sculptures through a multicultural perspective, asking how "multiculturalism" is materially embedded in the grotto's Buddhist art.

## 2. Early fusion of cultures

As has frequently been noted, an abrupt change in the artistic rendering of Buddhist sculptural images in northern China occurred around the end of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth centuries of the Northern Wei dynasty (386-534). In the last decades of the fifth century, during the reign of Emperor Xiaowen (471-99), and continuing into the early sixth century, Buddhist imagery characteristic of Chinese art replaced the foreign derived images predominant in the earlier part of the fifth century.

During the Eastern Han, the Silk Road provided a concrete channel through which Buddhism entered China. The period was politically fragmented and marked by recurrent warfare, and Buddhist teachings found receptive audiences among people seeking relief from instability and violence. As communities of believers expanded, forms of devotional image-making also began to take shape on Chinese soil. From the outset, the transmission of Buddhist art was inseparable from localization: early grotto sites in Xinjiang, including Bezeklik and Kizil, still carried clear traces of Gandharan visual conventions. Under the Northern Wei, grotto art did not simply inherit these models; it reworked them through the stylistic preferences of nomadic cultures, a development exemplified by the Yungang Grottoes at Datong. Over subsequent centuries—especially by the Tang—Buddhist imagery became increasingly Sinicized in both style and iconography. Seen as a whole, this long process of dissemination unfolded alongside major social and cultural transformations, so that Buddhist art repeatedly absorbed diverse influences while continually reshaping itself in local terms.

The Yungang Grottoes were carved in the Northern Wei, a time when Xianbei rulers controlled the Central Plains. In 386 CE, Tuoba Gui founded the Great Wei and elevated Buddhism to state-supported status; a little over a decade later, the capital moved to Pingcheng (398 CE) [3]. Because Pingcheng was both the political center and a Silk Road crossroads, it became an important setting for Buddhist exchange. Tuoba Tao, Gui's successor, showed strong personal commitment to Buddhism and encouraged Indian monks to teach in China, while sponsoring temple construction on a large scale. As Northern Wei rulers grew aware of Buddhism's value for governance, they folded it into their political agenda: Buddhist institutions could help stabilize society and, at the same time, project an image of a prosperous and culturally inclusive empire. The Yungang project emerged from this context.

What makes Yungang especially striking is the scale of its cultural layering. Across iconographic programs and sculptural details—faces, postures, garments, architectural motifs, and carving methods—one can observe a sustained dialog among Greek, Indian, Central Asian, Xianbei, and Central Plains traditions. Out of this dialog formed what scholars call the "Yungang Model" [4]: not

a single borrowed style, but a Northern Wei synthesis that accommodates multiple artistic languages. This is visible, for example, in the dance- and music-related figures that encode performance themes, and in the ritualized visual grammar used for Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and celestial beings. Together, these elements make Yungang a clear case of artistic production shaped by cross-regional contact. Fei Xiaotong's discussion of "cultural consciousness" helps frame this phenomenon: cultures recognize their own beauty while also valuing that of others, and such mutual appreciation enables coexistence. Reading Yungang in these terms not only clarifies a key stage in the evolution of Chinese Buddhist sculpture, but also explains why its multicultural character continued to inform later artistic and social developments.

### 3. Sculpture

Carved into a sandstone lens within the upper strata of the Jurassic Datong and Yungang formations, the Yungang Grottoes extend for a little over one kilometer from east to west. The site comprises 254 numbered caves—45 main caves and 209 subsidiary ones—and preserves more than 59,000 Buddhist figures across its eastern, central, and western zones. Because these areas were created in different phases, their sculptural languages are not uniform. The central zone, for instance, runs about 230 meters and includes nine major caves (5–13) together with 111 smaller caves. Even though it is the shortest of the three sections, it forms the densest cluster in terms of both cave quantity and monument scale. It is also the part of Yungang where doctrinal themes and visual programs appear in the richest variety.

In the early caves of Yungang, most of the Buddha statues are either dressed in right-shoulder-exposed robes or in full-shoulder robes. Based on the realistic depiction of drapery in ancient Indian and Gandharan art, the ornamentation on Yungang's right-shoulder-exposed robes exhibits greater decorative qualities. Beneath the robe lies the so-called "Samghati," which closely fits the body and appears to be made of sheer gauze. In addition to hooked floral patterns, motifs like honeysuckle and bead chains are carved along the edges of the garments. The newer type of Buddha image that appeared toward the end of the fifth century and, by the early part of the sixth century, replaced the older type has an almost insubstantial body dressed in a thicker pleated robe. The stiff-looking linear patterns of folds of the outer garment as shown on the new late Northern Wei Buddha images impose a unified design over the figure that largely hides the shape of the body beneath. This type of representation is generally regarded as a more Chinese-looking, or Sinicized image. The Buddha statue in Cave 19, the tallest seated Buddha with an exposed right shoulder in Yungang, alongside the open-air Buddha of Cave 20, serves as an exemplary instance of rich and meticulously detailed robe patterns. The right-shoulder-exposed robe is a typical style of Western Buddhist attire. The outer robe appears thick, with prominently carved drapery patterns that are elegant and intricate, seemingly made from high-quality woolen material. These robes exhibit strong three-dimensional effects and a distinct sense of gravity. The right-shoulder-exposed attire, popular in ancient India, is a simple, reverential, and open form of dress. Thus, in early Indian and Gandharan art, the Buddha often dons such robes. When Buddhist art spread to China, although the exposed-shoulder attire did not conform to Chinese ethical norms, it was adapted and preserved with slight modifications. This reflects the process of mutual adjustment and adaptation among different cultures during the evolution of the Yungang Grottoes' sculptural attire in its early stages. During this period, the full-shoulder robe also appeared alongside the right-shoulder-exposed robe. The full-shoulder robe is one of the hallmarks of ancient Indian and Gandharan Buddhist art. Many large Buddha statues in the early Yungang caves wear such garments. For instance, the attire of the standing Buddha in Cave 19 features a neckline that descends from the right shoulder to the upper chest, looping back over the left shoulder. The drapery flows downward from both shoulders, converging in a semi-elliptical shape at the center. The fabric's texture is intricate and consistent, forming water ripple-like patterns that cling closely to the

body, with clear contours. While the drapery appears thick and rugged, reminiscent of Gandharan style, its close-fitting effect reflects the Mathura artistic tradition. As Liang Sicheng remarked: "Although the carvings in Yungang display considerable Gandharan influence, the facial features and garment folds of the colossal statues in the five western caves exhibit a distinctly central Indian flavor" [5].

In Cave 18, Gandhara-style hanging sculptures of human figures appear. This artistic form, originating from Greek art, was commonly used in the veneration of Gandhara stupas. For instance, the Gandhara-style flying deity brackets feature high-relief flying figures closely attached to the leaf-patterned decorative bases. Their lower limbs are completely hidden within the lowest part of the leaf-shaped carving, leaving a nearly square tenon-shaped projection designed to fit into the pre-carved recesses on appropriate parts of the stupa. These hanging sculptures were either connected and inserted with wooden rods or bonded using plaster or mud paste. Apart from the two Bodhisattvas standing on pedestals, we also observe that the design and carving techniques of the ten celestial beings and the ten disciples are groundbreaking. Half-body or head-only donor figures are widely adopted across the Yungang Grottoes, appearing in various Buddha niches. However, full-body, half-body, or head-only depictions of disciples emerging through the grotto walls are unparalleled elsewhere.

For example, the "maiden" holding a flower or a purification bottle is carved in full figure, yet her lotus pedestal remains half hidden in the wall behind her. Above this figure, the disciples are arranged in a clear visual gradation: the relief shifts from full-body images to half-body forms and finally to heads alone, with the projecting parts steadily reduced. Their heads are rendered almost entirely in round relief and stand out strongly, whereas the torsos and lower bodies recede into, and eventually merge with, the grotto surface. This large-scale hanging-sculpture approach appears to be confined to this spot at Yungang and produces a layered set of character presences. In stylistic terms, it also points to the early phase of Yungang's engagement with Gandharan Buddhist models.

The disciple group in Cave 18 shows this cultural layering especially well. Five figures on the eastern wall survive in relatively good condition, each with a calm but differentiated expression and finely worked surfaces. They read as solemn listeners to the Buddha's teaching: the "maiden" with the purification bottle looks youthful and attentive; the disciple holding a lotus bud appears quiet and inward-looking; another, hands clasped near the chest, carries a restrained smile suggestive of inner ease. Most arresting are the roundly carved heads rising from the lower wall. Their necks remain attached to the rock face, giving the impression of figures emerging into visibility—an effect that can be read as symbolic release from suffering. Facial features here are strongly "Western-Regions" in flavor: deep-set eyes, high noses, lean and sharply modeled faces, and details such as neat rows of teeth, a slightly recessed forehead with a rounded Mahapurusa mark at the center, and hollowed temples and cheeks. High cheekbones and angular planes lend the faces an aged, worldly gravity. Curled brows, slightly drooping almond-shaped eyes, a projecting chin, and pronounced parenthesis-like creases at the mouth corners together create a consciously exaggerated Hellenistic taste, while still sustaining the figures' mixed register of solemnity and quiet joy.

Taken together, these sculptures suggest prototypes shaped by visual traditions from the Western Regions, yet the Yungang carvers did not merely replicate them. Instead, they re-formed the images through local workshop practices, producing a set of disciple figures that stands among the more characteristic early examples in Chinese cave temples. More broadly, early Yungang sculpture—whether in clothing, bodily form, or facial modeling—developed through repeated encounters, adjustments, and recombinations of different cultural resources. By absorbing foreign elements and rearticulating them within local conventions, the site gradually arrived at the multicultural visual language that later scholarship summarizes as the "Yungang model."

#### 4. Content and symbol

The Yungang Grottoes are valued not only for their statues but also for the narrative carvings that survive on their walls. More than 270 Buddhist story scenes are currently recorded at the site; among them, 218 can be identified with reasonable certainty, while close to a hundred are now too eroded for clear thematic reading. The visible corpus includes jataka tales of the Buddha's virtuous former lives, avadana stories that stress karmic causality, and episodes drawn from scriptures such as the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* and the *Lotus Sutra*. Most of these narratives entered the Central Plains together with the religion itself and were then reinterpreted by local workshops before being fixed in stone at Yungang. Narrative reliefs are relatively rare in the earliest caves, but they become far more prominent in the middle phase: with the exception of Cave 3, twelve grottoes from this period carry extensive story programs of larger scale and greater thematic variety. Cave 7, for example, features jataka scenes that foreground questions of life and moral choice; Caves 9 and 10 emphasize avadana narratives; and Cave 6 presents multiple episodes from the Buddha's biography, tracing a path from worldly existence toward enlightenment. Across these cycles, foreign visual resources were not simply retained but reworked through local habits of storytelling, which helps explain the distinctive narrative idiom that gradually formed at Yungang.

Within this narrative corpus, the story panels in Cave 6 are especially dense and provide a useful lens for observing Yungang's thematic diversity. The episodes they depict largely derive from imported Buddhist traditions, a point suggested by both their narrative structures and the symbolic motifs embedded in the reliefs. A representative case is "The Descent of the Gods to Select the Buddha," a scene set in sixth-century BCE Kapilavastu that recounts events surrounding Siddhartha's birth. In the carving, divine intervention frames the birth not only as a royal event but also as an instance of transcendent selection and guidance. Read in this way, the scene does more than narrate a miraculous origin: it visualizes a broader Buddhist claim that awakening requires moving beyond material limits toward spiritual insight. Its presence at Yungang therefore signals two related processes—first, the introduction of Buddhist story traditions during the Northern Wei, and second, the state's willingness to endorse core Buddhist ideas from above. As these Indian narratives were translated into relief sculpture, Northern Wei artisans also infused them with Central Plains visual sensibilities, producing a layered cultural synthesis rather than a simple importation.

A similar dynamic appears in Cave 37 through the carving of "The Elephant-Mount Conception." According to Buddhist accounts, Queen Maya conceived after a period of seclusion and vow-keeping, during which she dreamt of a white elephant with six tusks entering her right side—a sign of purity untouched by ordinary desire. The relief renders this moment with a clear bilateral composition: on the left, a descending elephant carries a seated figure holding the infant Siddhartha, prefiguring the pregnancy; on the right, Queen Maya reclines with closed eyes, still within the dream. Christianity offers a comparable birth narrative in the "Annunciation," where the Virgin Mary conceives through the Holy Spirit and is informed by the angel Gabriel. In both traditions, the origin of a central sacred figure is attributed to supernatural agency rather than paternal lineage. The parallel extends to visual structure as well. Whether in Annunciation paintings or in Yungang's elephant-dream scene, the story is organized around an encounter between an "intruder" and a "receiver," and the spatial arrangement stages their relationship to carry religious meaning forward. Seen side by side, these narratives help clarify why Yungang's story carvings can be read as part of a broader cross-religious grammar of sacred birth imagery.

Returning to Cave 6, the panel "The Manifestation of the Tree Deity" offers another example of cultural integration. Tagore once remarked that "Greek civilization arose in brick houses made of clay, while Indian civilization was born in forests" [6], a contrast that underscores the symbolic weight trees carry in Indian traditions. Evidence of tree worship reaches back to the Indus Valley seals, and

before anthropomorphic Buddha images emerged, sacred trees often served as devotional stand-ins. In Buddhist texts, trees occupy an elevated status because key moments of the Buddha's life are repeatedly located beneath them: his birth under the ashoka tree in Lumbini, his enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya, and his nirvana under the sal tree at Kushinagar. The same association is extended to the seven Buddhas of the past. The Yungang scene focuses on the Buddha's meditation beneath the Bodhi tree, where he withstands Mara's disturbances and attains enlightenment. As Buddhism moved into China, reverence for tree deities entered local religious life as well, though over time the emphasis shifted from the deity of the tree to the Buddha it signified. In the Cave 6 relief, the Bodhi tree dominates the left and upper portions of the panel, arching like a vast canopy over the meditating Buddha, who sits at the lower right. Here, the "tree" functions as a visual surrogate for early Buddhist faith, first marking stages of the Buddha's life and later accumulating richer meanings of compassion and wisdom. By carving this episode into the grotto, Northern Wei artisans used a locally legible visual language to re-tell an imported narrative while preserving its doctrinal core.

## 5. Conclusion

As Buddhist art took root in China, the Yungang Grottoes—an important cultural center of the Northern Wei—came to display multicultural features on several levels. At the level of iconographic content, many of Yungang's sculptural themes (for example, images of Shakyamuni, the Three Eastern Buddhas, and Kumāra Tāṇḍa) point to the eastward movement of Buddhism and the narrative traditions that traveled with it. If these subjects register cultural contact most visibly, the making of the statues shows how such contact was worked into local practice. Early carving at Yungang drew heavily on Gandharan precedents and related Hellenistic sculptural techniques, yet later phases increasingly adapted those methods to bodily ideals and esthetic preferences associated with the Central Plains and with Northern Wei multiethnic society. The relief programs and figure types in the caves also invite comparison across religious art traditions, suggesting shared visual strategies that emerged through long-term exchange. For these reasons, Yungang is not only a major monument of Chinese Buddhist art but also a revealing archive of cultural interaction. Studying the site helps situate Chinese Buddhism within wider Eurasian networks and clarifies how local artisans transformed imported resources into a distinctive visual language with lasting historical influence.

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