



*Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project*

## **Buddhism and Buddhist Art**

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### **Abstract:**

This curriculum unit is designed for a 10th-grade art history course as part of Gilman School's humanities program. Gilman is a private, non-denominational all-boys school in Baltimore, MD. The required 10th-grade course follows a required 9th grade World Cultures course that focuses on geography, world economies, and cultural formation.

A major objective of this part of the humanities curriculum is to focus on the content, the form, and the context of art objects in history and around the world. A continuing theme is to understand the global faith traditions that shape many of these cultural artifacts.

This unit is structured to introduce Buddhism as a faith practice that influences the creation of art. Students will describe and analyze related artworks from ancient to contemporary times in three 80 minute classes.

### **Guiding Questions:**

In this unit, students look closely at different representations of the Buddha and consider the following guiding questions:

1. Who is Buddha and what is Buddhism?
2. How are historic Buddhist artworks relevant to contemporary life?
3. Where do these works exist today? What happens when a statue of the Buddha is removed from a temple context and studied in a museum context?
4. How does hearing from and talking to a contemporary Buddhist practitioner change student understanding when looking at historic Buddhist art as well as contemporary art influenced by the Buddhist faith tradition?

# Curriculum Unit Plan

## **Class One: Introducing Buddhism and the Historical Buddha.**

Homework for first class: Ask each student to bring in an object or find an image that they think suggests the Buddha or Buddhism.

Students will learn about the life of the Buddha and the basic beliefs of Buddhism in several ways.

1. Explore this [BBC website](#) or [Pluralism site on Buddhism](#) Ask students to write down five interesting facts learned by exploring these sites.

2. Introduce the life of the historical Buddha with slides 1-19 of [Laura Harrington's slide show on American Buddhism](#). Ask students to write down four interesting facts they learned about the historical Buddha's life as we look at the slide show.

3. Look at how the story of historical Buddha is represented in artworks. The teacher chooses 5 slides from the [Met Museum web page on Buddha](#).

Assign students to work in small groups. Print out images of each work and tape each one to a section of a whiteboard or on a large sheet of paper. Ask each group to describe and analyze a different work. Have each group describe the figure by noting on the whiteboard: the pose, posture (sitting, standing, lying down), facial expression, clothing, hand gestures.

What does the Buddha hold, if anything?

What materials are used to make the sculpture?

Does this artwork in any way connect to the life of the Buddha that they were just told?

Print out caption information from the website and make it available after students visually analyze the artwork.

After the groups complete the analysis of their Buddha, then have students circulate and look at how the other groups described and analyzed their artwork.

4. Introduce some of the basic vocabulary of Buddhist beliefs:

### **A working vocabulary of Buddhist terms**

Buddha – Enlightened One. A being that has achieved blessedness (nirvana). The historical Buddha Sakyamuni was born c. 553 B. C. E.

Bodhisattva – Compassionate beings who defer their own achievement of enlightenment to help others in the same quest.

Dharma – Doctrine or teaching of Buddha. Natural law or duty.

Karma – to act. The sum of a person’s deeds, good and bad. Determines how a being is reborn.

Mudra – origin: mudra, seal or sign. Arm and hand gestures of Buddha that convey specific meanings

Nirvana – Final escape from cycle of life, death, reincarnation. Extinction of all desires. Liberation. Blessedness.

Samsara – The repeating cycle of birth, life death and rebirth, continuous reincarnation.

### **The Four Noble Truths**

1. The truth of suffering: Life is frustrating and painful. Suffering is a part of life.
2. The truth of the cause of suffering: Suffering emerges from craving for life to be other than it is. Life is impermanent and change is constant. The only certainty in life is that it will end.
3. The truth of the end of suffering: Understanding that all things are impermanent and ending the chase after satisfaction is Enlightenment.
4. The truth of the path that frees us from suffering. There is a way, or “path” to end the cause of suffering. We need to abandon our expectations about the way we think things should be and begin to develop awareness about the way things are.

**Closing Discussion-** Looking at the items students brought to class, do any of them connect to any of the basic ideas of Buddhism that we learned today?

## **Class Two: Lived Religion**

Buddhist PRACTICES (first 40 minutes of class)

Hand out the two pages shortlist of [“10 Misconceptions about Buddhism”](#) From the Blog by Robert E. Buswell Jr. and Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Tricycle summer 2014) Ask students to comment on what they learned about reading about the misconceptions.

Discuss the practice of meditation. What is Meditation?

[Pluralism Project explains Meditation](#) (Watch video on meditation and then discuss)  
Another possible exploration of meditation

Watch [“The Happiest Man in the World” TED talk](#)— start around 13:26 minutes and watch until 16:08. Biochemist turned Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard says we can train our minds.

Introduce the idea of sound as part of meditation. Listen to a few minutes of one or more of these chants.

[Buddhist Chanting](#) video

[Tibetan Singing Bowls meditation](#) video

[Chanting the Sutras](#) video

[Single Voice chant at home](#)

(Here is a teacher resource: [How to Chant](#) video to use as background information on chanting. This is not suitable for use in the classroom because it is a teaching video for Buddhists.)

Class Activity:

For one minute, Listen to all the sounds you hear in and out of the classroom. Write down what sounds you hear. Then consider: Why would chanting or listening to bells or chimes be a practice that is helpful to meditation?

Look at [Mindful exercises for teens](#) to introduce the topic of mindfulness. Explain the exercises but it is not necessary to do them. Rather, this is source material to stimulate a discussion of how mindfulness is different from Buddhist meditation. How might mindfulness exercises differ from Buddhist meditation?

To prepare the students for the visitor who is scheduled to come for the second half of class, ask the students to each write on an index card two questions that they would like to ask the guest.

Topics to suggest: Worship spaces, Tools for Prayers, Gender Roles, Religious education, Food rituals and regulations, Courtship and Dating, Marriage, Clothing, Special holy days and how are they observed, Meditation practices.

(Second 40 minutes of class)

Invite a guest speaker to the classroom who is a practicing Buddhist. Ahead of the visit, discuss with the guest what they would like to share with the students about their practice of meditation and prayer, their Buddhist temple, teacher and community as well as the possible topics of student questions. Discuss guidelines for speaker presentation: they are only describing one personal experience and they are not representing the entire faith. Suggest that you will facilitate and play an active role, co-teaching and responding to questions that are beyond the scope of the guest's experience.

Meet with a contemporary practitioner who discusses her or her practice and then students pose questions.

### **CLASS THREE**

Debrief after the visit from a practicing Buddhist and go over the answers to questions posed. What met their expectations and what surprised them about the visit?

#### **Examine Artworks that communicate Buddhist ideas**



Look at a PowerPoint of Buddhist art and architecture or a PowerPoint of representations of the Buddha (a few examples are found below). Edit down PowerPoints to fewer slides for class use.

Assign students to each sketch a Buddha statue or copy a Buddha painting. Either print out a slide from the powerpoint to use as a model or have students visit the [MET museum website](https://www.metmuseum.org).

Choose one representation of Buddhist artwork. Ask the students to read basic information provided on the website about the artwork.

Hand out paper and pencil with erasers. Sketch the basic forms, posture, facial expression of the figure chosen. Consider how line, shape, and value are used to create the figure. (These are concepts that have been introduced in an earlier unit of study).

Where do these works exist today? Consider context. What happens when a Buddha statue is removed from a temple context and studied in a museum context?

Show [Met Artist Project video: Photographer Thomas Struth](#) He describes his responses to the Buddhas on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. At the end of the video, Struth poses the following questions: (Break into small groups and ask students to try to answer these questions)

What does the artwork mean?

Can it change my life?

Can it transform my opinion or my existence in some small or large way?

Struth says the silence he finds in the Buddha museum is important to him. How is this silence different than the silence he might experience if he visited a Buddhist temple? When the class reconvenes discuss: How is the sacred quality of the Buddha perceived differently in the museum?

### **CONTEMPORARY ARTIST**

Look at contemporary artist Mariko Mori's work on Khan Academy site.

[Japanese artist Mariko Mori](#)



Teaching Resources to learn more about Mariko Mori:

[How this Mori Artwork might be interpreted](#)

[Mori and the Art of Global Interconnectedness](#)

## **Final Assessment**

(Format can be written essay, 2+ minute video, 2+ minute podcast, Flip Grid posting)

Compare and contrast a historic Buddha artwork with an artwork by contemporary artist Mariko Mori that incorporates Buddhism. Describe each work in terms of body pose, hand gestures, facial expressions, symbols and materials. Note similarities and differences. What does each artwork reveal to you about Buddhism? What contemporary ideas does Mariko Mori's work suggest to you?

For your Conclusion, give your personal response to these two questions:

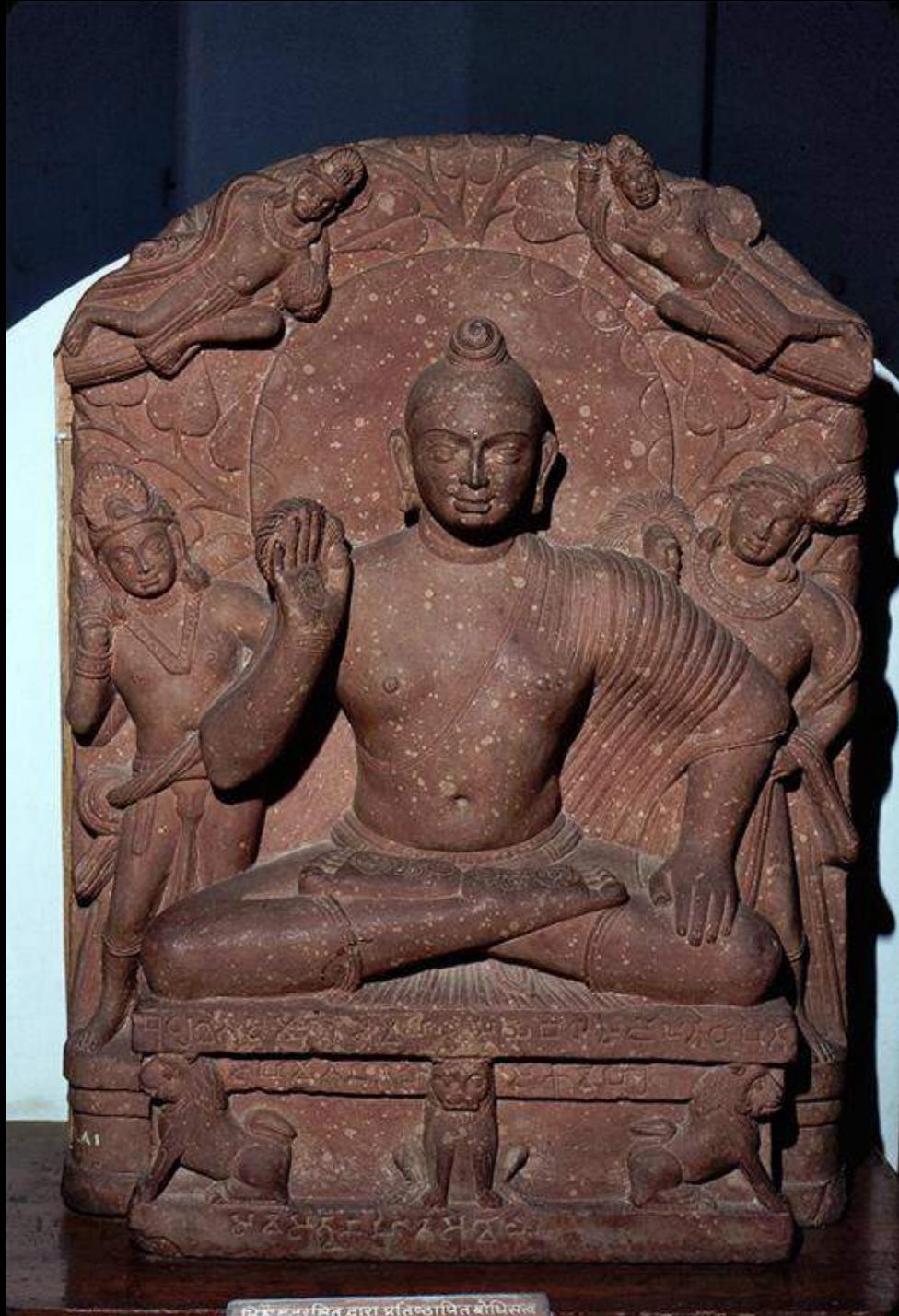
1. How did hearing from and talking to a contemporary Buddhist practitioner influence your understanding when you look at historic Buddhist art?
2. How did hearing from and talking to a contemporary Buddhist practitioner influence your understanding when you look at contemporary art influenced by the Buddhist faith tradition?

***For information about the Religious Worlds of New York  
summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching  
on religious diversity, see: [www.religiousworldsnyc.org](http://www.religiousworldsnyc.org).***

# Buddhism: Representations of Buddha



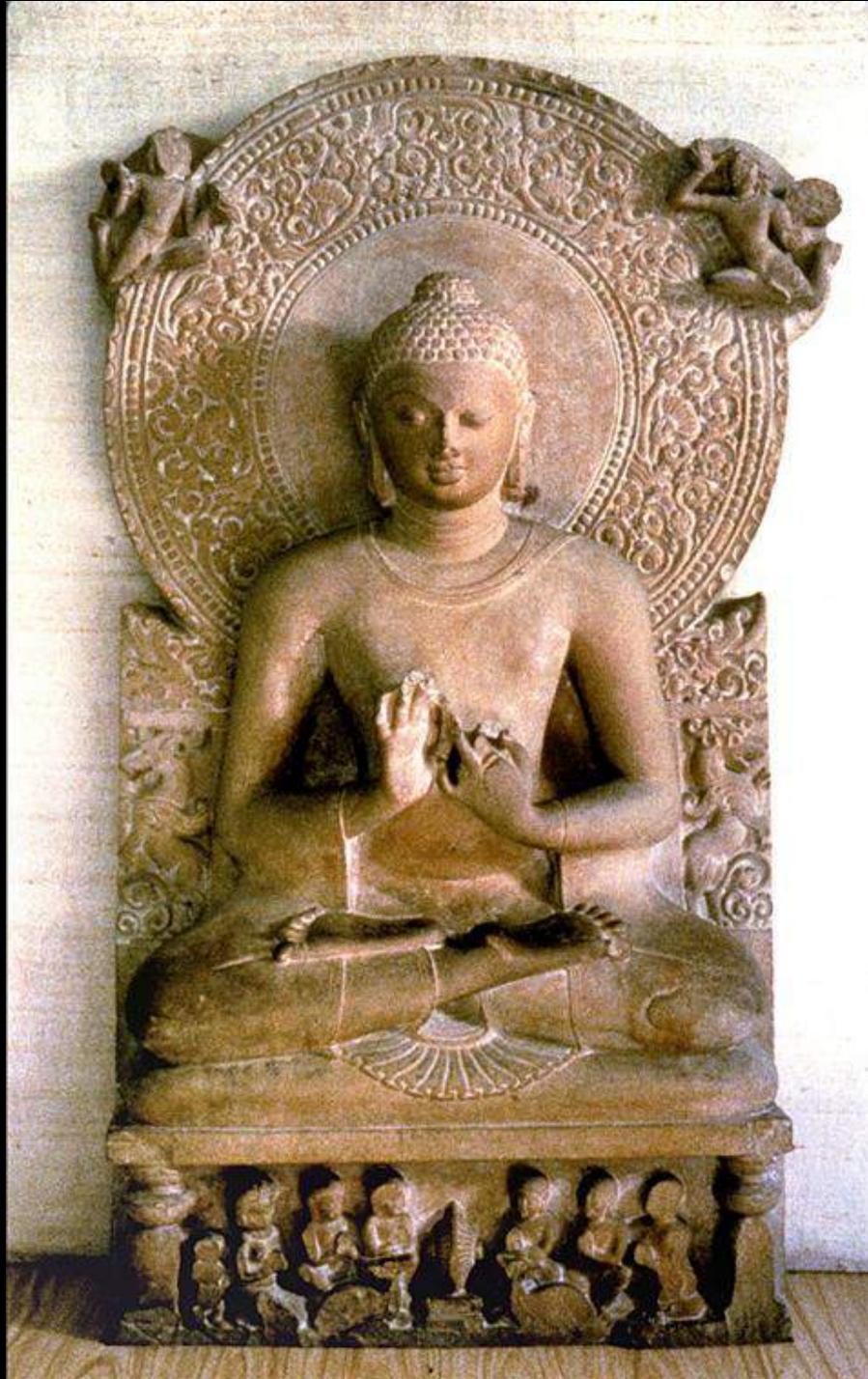




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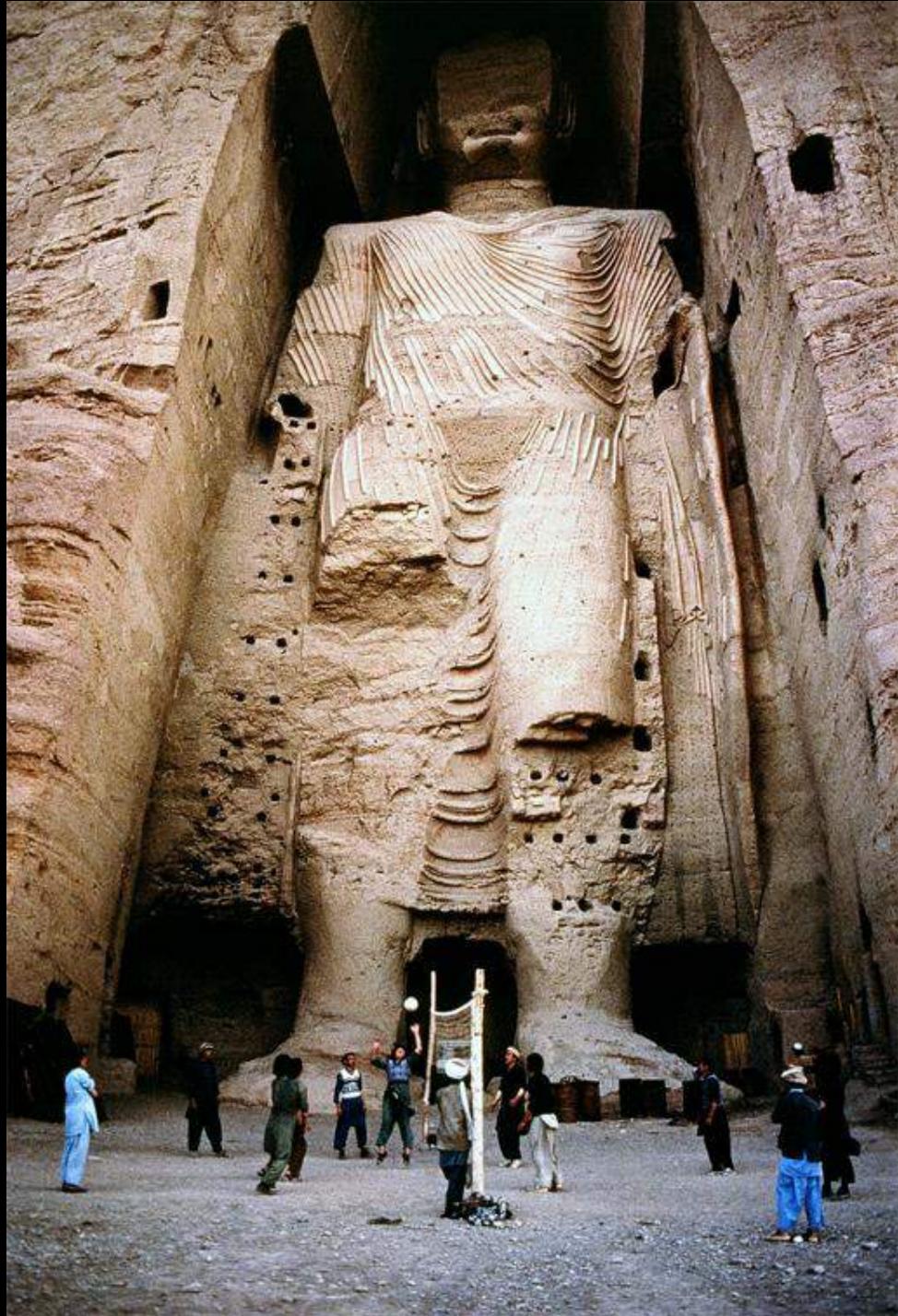














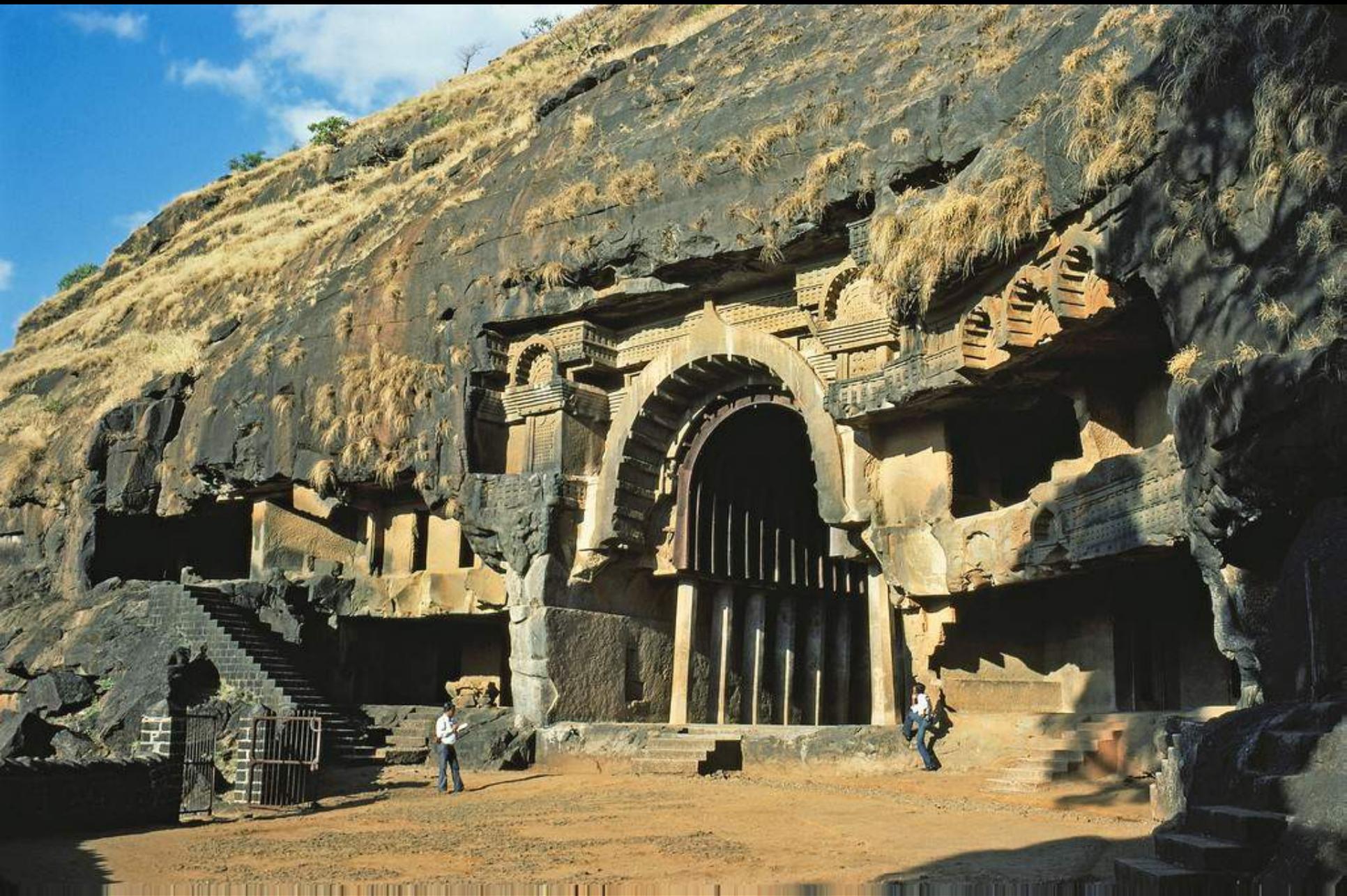


Art\_\_Architecture\_\_Buddhist

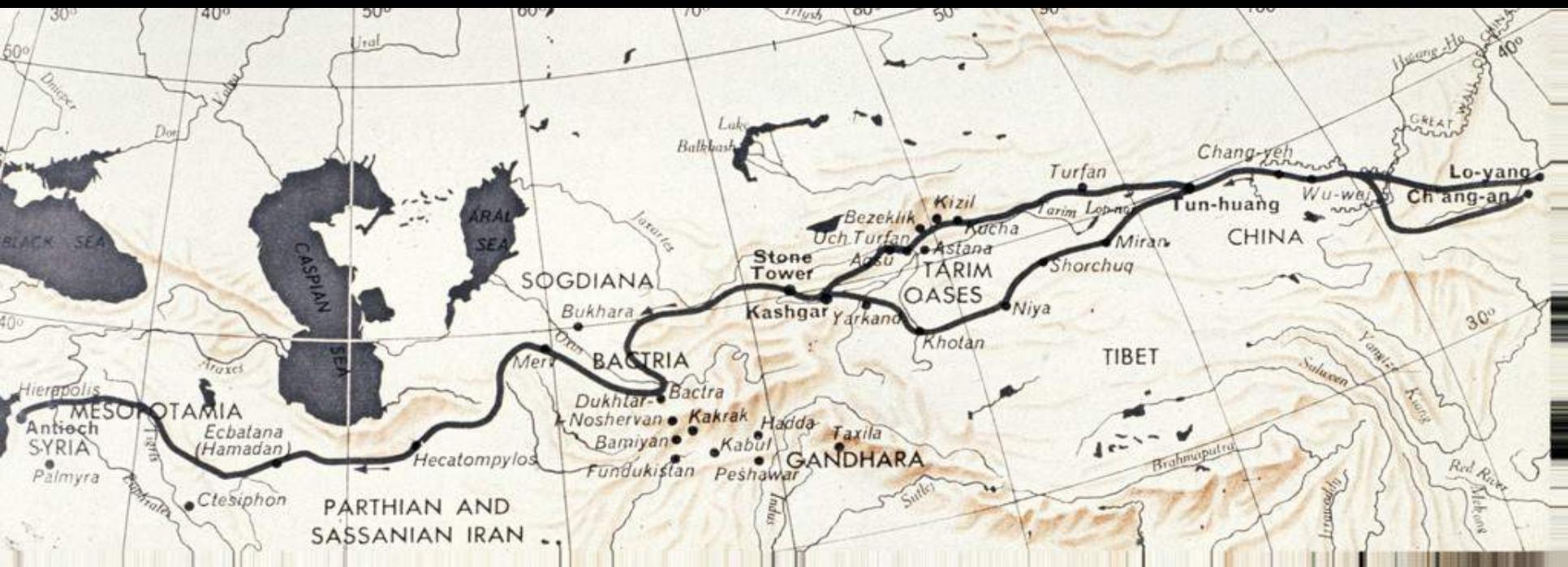








































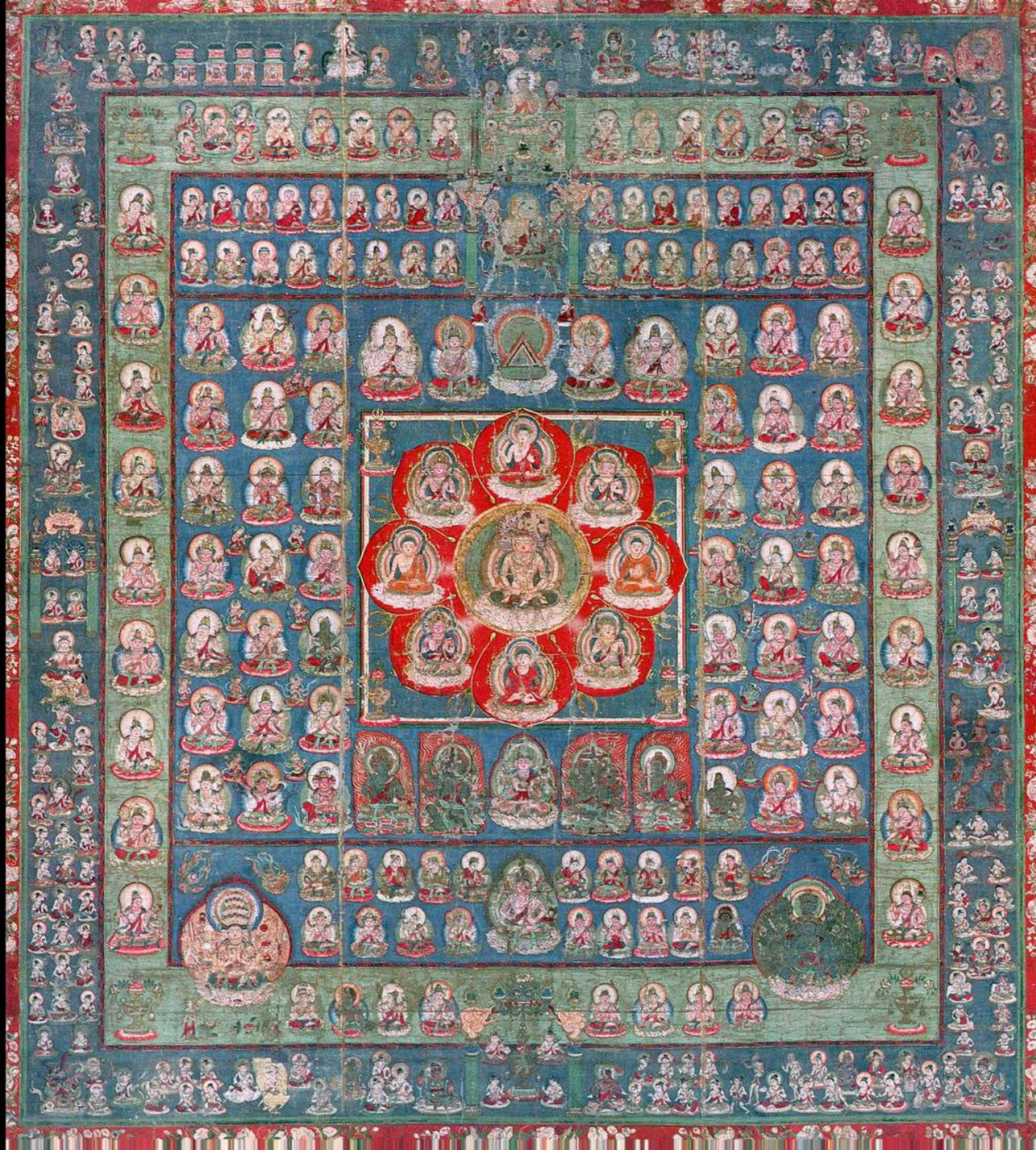




















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