



The divine palaces of the Buddha: painted and sculptured architectural frames in the Indo-Tibetan art of the Western Himalaya

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In Indian Buddhist art, at least since Gandhāra times, it is noticeable the use to enclose Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and other prominent personages (grouping all together in a narrative scene, or singly) into architectural frames.

In the golden reliquary from Bîmarān (Afghanistan), now in the British Museum, a sequence of Buddhas, Hindu Gods, and devotees are indeed all contained within arched niches. The architectural forms that appear on the Bîmarān reliquary reflect the cultural milieu in that region in those times. In fact, it shows a blend of Indian styles, as it is evident in the pointed arched elements of each unit, recalling the *caitya* windows shaped as ogival arches – later called *gavākṣa* – recurrent in the Indian rock carved cave architecture, and in the Hellenistic inspired components, as the pillars that support the arches.

Similarly, in this synthetic survey of painted and sculptured architectural frames found and examined in the ancient Western Himalayan temples, it is noticeable a blend of styles, nevertheless each element harmoniously contributes to the composition of an organic whole. The combination of different forms and patterns is more rich and complex in the Himalayan temples, if compared to the early specimens from India. In the course of time, the Indian prototypes developed and became highly differentiated, according to the areas, the cultural-historical periods and the building materials. Hence, the articulated architectural production of Buddhist India was reaped as a mature fruit by the Tibetan artists, and combined with the local taste and traditions: then the various styles were elaborated. Therefore, the representations of architecture enclosing divinities can actually tell the history of the interweaving crossed influences that were covering, like a precious net, the Western Himalayan regions.

Once searching for the Indian origins of the architectural framing, we are overwhelmed by a lot of specimens, mainly sculptured architectural frames, starting for in-

stance from the *stûpa* basement known as the “Double-headed eagle shrine” at Sirkap (Taxila), to the fragment showing a devotee within a *torana*, from Butkara I (Swât), now in the National Museum of Oriental Art of Rome, and so on.

However, observing a slab from Amarāvati, now in the British Museum, we can notice an interesting development: the Buddha figure is here surrounded by an elaborate architectural structure, representing a *stûpa*, with basement and terraces populated and enlivened by other figures.

Also in the façade of cave 19 at Ajanta, a sculpted *stûpa* surrounds the Buddha. Not to speak about the interior of cave 26, where a complex *stûpa* structure accommodates a seated Buddha. However, this last instance can be classifiable in a further category, on account of its tri-dimensionality.

Anyway, two stelae of the Pāla-Sena period from Vikramapura now respectively in the Varendra Research Museum of Rajshahi and in the Dacca Museum, represent what can be considered a further development, allowing us to trace a closer correction with Himalayan art. Here the Buddha figures, presumably Ratnasambhava and Amitābha, are surmounted by a *śikhara* structure, therefore depicting the Buddhas inside real palaces.

In fact, analysing the Himalayan specimens we need to operate a methodological distinction between elaborate *prabhāmaṇḍala* (that can suggest architectural frames) and actual representation of architecture; in other words, a distinction has to be made among those images framed only by a *torana* (usually adorned by mythological animals) and those depicted within a palace whose architectural structure is developing all around a *toraṅga*.

Particularly in the Buddha palaces, as represented by the Himalayan sculptors and painters – for instance at Nako (Kinnaur), Lha-lung (Spiti) and A-lci (Ladakh) – it appears that the buildings are cut by vertical sections, in order to expose the *garbhagha* where the Buddha and/or other Buddhist divinities are located. We are in front of the representation of a monumental architecture intended to lodge holy personages, the ideal conclusion of the long artistic journey from the *prabhāmaṇḍala* to the palace, culminating in the detailed Himalayan architectural frames.

The detailed rendering of these divine palaces will be one of the topics of this paper. I shall compare a rich series of typologies documented by the door tympanums – trilobated or polylobated – by the columns, by the windows and terraces, by the shapes of the buildings – often surmounted by multiple roofs and by the decoration of the façades. The, I shall try to examine the recurrence of the patterns and to analyse the problems posed by the research of the stylistic sources. Consequently, a question could be posed: which ones were the actual models? Presumably, the Tibetan artists were reproducing almost contemporary buildings, which they could see in nearby trans-Himalayan areas, cultural contexts in their turn inspired by Pāla-Sena architectural prototypes. But also a

big role should have been played by the transportable sculptured specimens, as for instance the ivory Buddha group with painted wood frame from Kashmir, now in the Gopi Krishna Kanoria Collection, at Patna.

Therefore, it is conjecturable that inside some ancient Western Himalayan temples we could find clues that will enable us to reconstruct at least a portion of the history of the Indo-Tibetan styles of art and architecture. The unfolding of a series of architectural elements, the comparison with actual structures – drawing parallels and looking for crossed influences – will be tools, instrumental for the study of the artistic milieu at the beginning of the Second Diffusion of Buddhism (*bsTan-pa phyi-dar*) in the Western Tibetan Himalaya.