



IDP
INTERNATIONAL
DUNHUANG
PROJECT



BUDDHISM

Worksheet 6

Object Focus: Buddhist Paintings

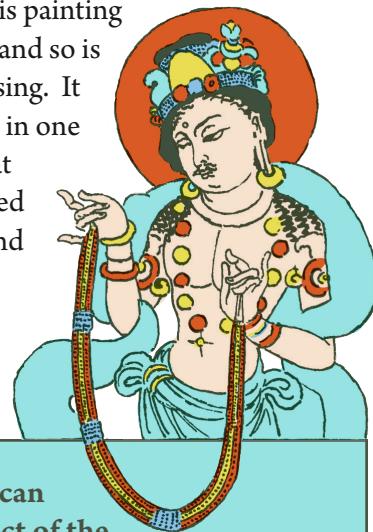


Buddha preaching the Dharma. Detail from the *Paradise of Śākyamuni*. 1919,0101,0.6
© The British Museum

This image is of a painting on silk from the Stein collection at the British Museum. These silk paintings were part of the cache of manuscripts and artefacts found in the early twentieth century in cave 17, the Library Cave, at the Mogao caves near Dunhuang, northwest China. The silk paintings found in the Library Cave mostly date from the eighth to tenth centuries.

Many of them were brought back to London by Sir Aurel Stein, who carried out four expeditions to Chinese Central Asia in the early twentieth century. Others, brought back to Europe by Paul Pelliot, can be seen in the Guimet museum in Paris.

This particular painting depicts the figure of Buddha preaching the Dharma. It dates from the early eighth century AD. In real life, this painting measures 139cm x 102cm and so is both impressive and imposing. It would probably have hung in one of the many cave temples at Dunhuang, which were used both for private worship and to demonstrate status and wealth in society.



Take a closer look at the larger image of this painting overleaf and see if you can recognise the following details which tell us something about both the subject of the painting and the people who commissioned it.

We can interpret the subject of this painting — ‘Buddha Preaching the Dharma’ — by looking at the central figure. Buddha adopts the vitarka mudrā, a hand gesture which represents intellectual discussion. The circle formed by his thumb and index finger is the sign of the wheel of Dharma and reminds us of the cycle of life.

Notice the uṣṇiṣa, or bump on Buddha’s head symbolising his wisdom and enlightenment.

Notice the elongated ears. These remind us of the heavy jewels Buddha would once have worn as a prince. He has sacrificed much to live a spiritual life.

Buddha is raised on a lotus petal platform. Around him float other figures on lotus flowers. This flower symbolises purity and goodness, and reminds us that, like the lotus, which grows from mud, we can rise above our circumstances to achieve goodness.

Buddha is surrounded by attendants and sits beneath a magnificent canopy. These visual aids help the faithful to picture the Pure Land they strive towards.

In the bottom left hand corner a smaller kneeling figure represents the female donor, or sponsor of this painting. A missing piece in the opposite corner would have contained her husband. Pious donors such as these were vital to the production of Buddhist art.

The fragile silk on which this image was painted has deteriorated in parts. When these paintings were discovered in the library cave, they were stored in rolls and many were in poor condition. Originally there would have been a complete painted border around the outside of this panel.

You can see a number of rectangular panels or cartouches in this scene. These may have contained instruction from a sutra, or inscriptions which we cannot now read. In some cases these were never completed. Why do you think this may have happened?