



'Iconography' is a word we use to talk about the use of images or symbols in art to represent a particular idea, movement, person or belief. Buddhist art has a very clear iconography and the image of the Buddha in particular is characterized by various recognisable motifs which developed out of a desire to share the teachings of Buddhism with a wider audience.

Some images of the Buddha are pictured below. It is interesting to note however that very early Buddhist art (before the first century BC) did not depict the Buddha as a human figure at all but instead used familiar symbols such as a stupa or a dharma wheel to represent him instead.



Top: Prints of Buddha. 1919,0101,0.254. Buddha with a Begging Bowl. 1919,0101,0.193. © The British Museum.
Detail from a Paper Prayer Sheet. Or.8210/P.14. © The British Library Board.
Bottom: Seated Bodhisattva. EO 1211a. Wooden Buddha. EO 1108. © Le musée Guimet.
Buddha Stencil. IOL Tib J 1361. © The British Library Board.



Look at the artefacts above which were found at different sites along the Silk Road. Can you see any recurring symbols or motifs on the figure of the Buddha? What do you think these motifs might represent?



What symbols or motifs did you notice?

Did you notice that all of these images picture the Buddha sitting cross-legged?

In Buddhist art there are a number of set postures for the Buddha called asanas. These can tell us about what Buddha is doing or thinking. The cross-legged 'lotus' position is one of meditation, but you may also see images of the Buddha standing upright with hands raised in a gesture (or mudrā) of reassurance, or reclining in a pose which refers to the end of his life before entering Parinirvāṇa.

Can you see any recurring physical characteristics in these images of the Buddha?

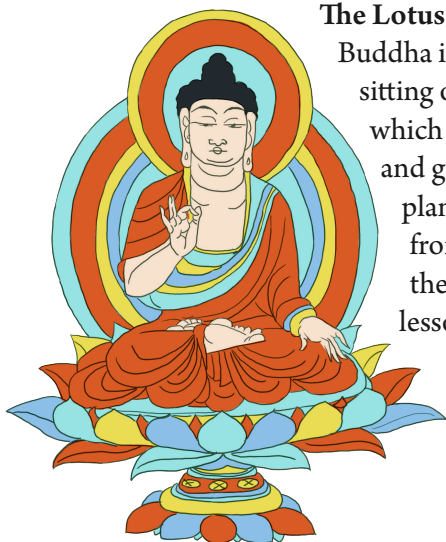


Replica figures at the Dunhuang Academy. Photographer: Abby Baker. © International Dunhuang Project

The Buddha has thirty-two lakṣaṇa or special physical characteristics which mark him out as a 'cosmic being'. The lakṣaṇa represent spiritual characteristics of the Buddha such as wisdom and enlightenment and also demonstrate the idea that Buddha's outer beauty is a reflection of his inner spiritual nature. In these images you may have noticed the tuft of hair or third eye between Buddha's eyebrows (ūrṇā) which symbolises spiritual insight or the bump on the top of the head (uṣṇiṣa) which symbolises wisdom and spirituality and his attainment of enlightenment.

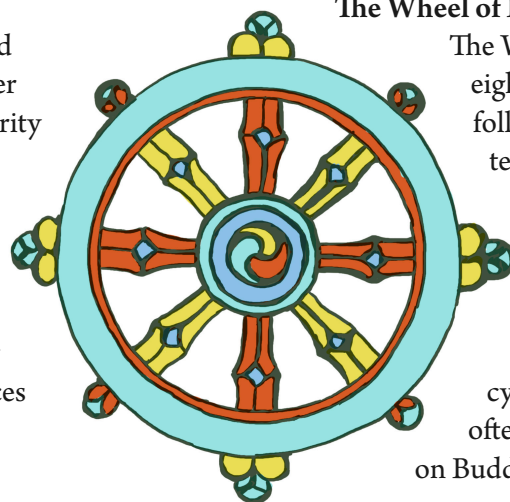
Other physical symbols such as his elongated ears (which remind us the Buddha was born a wealthy and privileged prince who wore heavy earrings but who sacrificed luxury to live a spiritual life) are not considered lakṣaṇa but are common in images of the Buddha making the meaning and message of Buddhist art clear and easy to recognize.

Other common motifs



The Lotus Flower

Buddha is often pictured sitting on a lotus flower which symbolizes purity and goodness. As a plant which rises from the mud, the lotus is a lesson that we can rise above our circumstances to achieve goodness.



The Wheel of Law

The Wheel of Law has eight spokes to remind followers of Buddha's teaching. The Noble Eightfold Path outlined eight rules of living. The Wheel itself is a reminder of the cycle of life and can often be found pictured on Buddha's hands and feet.