



From Gandhāra to the Mekong Delta: The Acculturation of Early Buddhist Art in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the formation of early Buddhist art in Vietnam through archaeological evidence from the Óc Eo cultural sphere, with the Loi My wooden Buddha as its principal case. Drawing on archaeological findings, art-historical comparison, and iconographic interpretation, the article argues that the conventional concept of "Indianization" is insufficient to describe the entire process. Buddhist images and visual conventions reached the Mekong Delta through maritime exchange networks, passed through several intermediary centres, and were reworked by local craftsmen. Features often associated with Gandhāran art, including the anthropomorphic Buddha, a balanced face, a solemn stance, and the organization of the robe, may be regarded as visual references. The Loi My statue, however, is not a direct copy of a Gandhāran prototype. Its wooden medium, restrained lines, and slender form reflect adaptation to local techniques and aesthetic preferences in southern Vietnam. The case highlights the active role of Óc Eo communities in receiving, selecting, and reshaping external artistic conventions into a locally meaningful form of Buddhist art.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of "Indianization" was once widely used to explain the presence of Indian religions, writing systems, rituals, and art in ancient Southeast Asian societies (Cœdès, 1968). This perspective is valuable because it identifies a major source of influence, yet it can obscure the role of receiving communities. Archaeological evidence from Óc Eo indicates that local populations did not simply adopt a ready-made cultural model. Through trade, they encountered multiple cultural currents, selected elements that suited local circumstances, and adjusted them to their living conditions and aesthetic preferences (Higham, 2014). Early Buddhist art in southern Vietnam should therefore be situated within a process of interregional exchange in which local agency formed an integral part of stylistic development.

Among the archaeological spaces of southern Vietnam, Óc Eo is particularly suitable for examining this process. Its system of sites and artefacts reflects extensive commercial relations not only with neighboring areas but also with more distant centres (Malleret, 1959). More recent publications continue to emphasize the openness and multi-source character of Óc Eo culture (Borell, 2014). In such an environment, Buddhism entered local life not only as doctrine or ritual. It was accompanied by devotional images, forms of sacred-space organization, production techniques, and visual conventions that local craftsmen could observe, remember, and transform.

At the level of visual form, Gandhāra constitutes an important point of reference. The school developed in the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent and is widely known for its anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha (Nehru, 1989). A balanced face, prominent nose, contemplative gaze, upright posture, and layered treatment of drapery are among the features frequently associated with Gandhāran sculpture (Zwalf, 1996). However, when such works are compared with artefacts from the Mekong Delta, the objective should not be to identify an exact copy. Traces of influence may survive only in the conception of the Buddha image or in selected formal choices that were simplified to accommodate local materials and aesthetic preferences (Le Manh That, 2023).

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHODS

2.1. Theoretical background

In cultural studies, acculturation refers to a sustained process of contact through which external elements are received without necessarily retaining their original form. A community may borrow symbols, techniques, or aesthetic patterns and subsequently reorganize them according to its religious needs and social conditions. In art, such changes often become visible in material, proportion, surface treatment, and expressive qualities. From this perspective, Óc Eo should not be regarded as a peripheral zone whose sole function was to receive Indian culture. It was an environment capable of selecting and recreating imported elements, consistent with scholarship emphasizing the agency of ancient Southeast Asian societies (Cœdès, 1968; Higham, 2014).

Gandhāran art itself was the product of multiple layers of contact. Indian Buddhism, Greco-Roman artistic legacies, Iranian elements, and trans-Asian commercial activity all contributed to the environment in which this school developed. One of Gandhāra's prominent contributions was the strong development of anthropomorphic Buddha images alongside earlier aniconic symbols such as the Dharma wheel, the Bodhi tree, footprints, and the empty throne (Nehru, 1989). In sculpture, craftsmen paid close attention to facial structure, bodily proportion, spiritual expression, and the movement of garments (Zwalf, 1996). The resulting images combined physical presence with an orientation toward stillness and transcendence.

The representation of the Buddha in human form changed the way devotees approached the object of worship. The sacred figure became more concrete while retaining a sense of distance and sanctity through posture, gaze, and symbolic attributes. As this image type spread to other regions, it was rarely reproduced unchanged. Local craftsmen tended to preserve certain core features while adjusting them to pre-existing visual traditions. Evidence from Southeast Asia shows that localization could substantially alter bodily proportion, drapery, and surface treatment (Brown, 1996). This provides an important basis for examining the Loi My wooden Buddha, an object produced in a material and through techniques different from the stone-sculpture traditions associated with Gandhāra.

The movement of visual conventions to the Mekong Delta was closely linked to ancient maritime networks. Along sea routes, commodities circulated together with people, beliefs, technologies, and artistic tastes. Trading settlements such as Óc Eo could therefore become meeting places for merchants, monks, craftsmen, and local communities (Malleret, 1959). The study of Buddhist sculpture in this region should consequently relate artefacts to maritime trade, religious transmission, and the formation of local identity. Archaeological evidence from southern Vietnam also indicates that Óc Eo interacted with multiple currents of influence rather than depending on a single centre (Nguyen, P. L., 2005).

From an iconographic perspective, Buddhist sculpture in Óc Eo performed a religious function while also revealing the region's position within a broader network of exchange. The presence of Buddhist images suggests that the new religion had acquired a place in the spiritual life of ancient southern communities. At the same time, the formal characteristics of these artefacts reflect artistic connections extending beyond the local sphere. Such evidence further suggests that Buddhism did not enter the territory of present-day Vietnam through a single route; southern Vietnam may have constituted an early zone of reception alongside other centres (Le Manh That, 2023).

2.2. Research approach and materials

This study adopts a qualitative approach combining archaeological interpretation, art-historical comparison, and iconographic reading. The Loi My wooden Buddha is used as the principal case through which the study examines the relationship between interregional Buddhist visual conventions and local adaptation within the Óc Eo cultural sphere. Comparative discussion draws on scholarship concerning Gandhāran sculpture, Southeast Asian artistic transformation, the archaeology of the Mekong Delta, and the early history of Buddhism in Vietnam. Formal similarities are not treated as proof of direct copying; instead, the analysis considers how visual conventions may have circulated through maritime networks and how material, production techniques, and local aesthetic preferences contributed to their transformation in the Mekong Delta.

III. RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. Gandhāran imprints in Óc Eo Buddhist imagery

The appearance of the Buddha in anthropomorphic form marked a major transformation in Buddhist art. In earlier phases, his presence was often evoked through the Dharma wheel, Bodhi tree, footprints, or empty throne. With the development of anthropomorphic Buddha images, the object of worship acquired a specific face, garment, posture, and expression. Gandhāra was one of the centres that contributed to the development of this image type in the context of interaction between Indian Buddhism and Greco-Roman visual traditions (Nehru, 1989). A new visual language emerged from this process and was subsequently interpreted in diverse ways across different cultural regions.

Gandhāran Buddha images are often characterized by balanced facial proportions, a prominent nose, deep-set eyes, curled or gathered hair, a harmonious body, and garments rendered with clearly articulated folds. Such treatment evokes the bodily ideals of classical Western art, but it is not limited to naturalistic representation. A composed expression and solemn posture transform the human body into a religious image. According to Zwalf (1996), an important quality of Gandhāran sculpture lies in the combination

of bodily realism and the transcendent character of its expression. This balance contributed to the wider circulation and influence of Gandhāran image conventions in the ancient Buddhist world.

When Óc Eo artefacts are placed alongside Gandhāran sculptures, a direct copying relationship is difficult to assume. Artistic conventions in motion usually passed through multiple intermediaries: a small statue transported by ship, an image remembered by a monk or merchant, a prototype transmitted among craftsmen, or even a general conception of how the Buddha should appear. Influence should therefore be identified at the level of visual paradigms rather than through one-to-one similarity in individual details. What may remain is an upright and solemn posture, a restrained facial expression, an emphasis on balance, or the idea of using drapery to convey purity and composure.

Some Buddhist sculptures associated with the Óc Eo cultural sphere display relatively balanced faces, emphasized noses, and upright postures, suggesting that local craftsmen were familiar with broader regional conventions of Buddha representation. Their forms, however, do not reproduce the heavy massing and deeply layered garments characteristic of Gandhāran stone sculpture. Lines are often simplified, surfaces are less densely detailed, and expressions appear softer. These differences indicate that external influences were reworked in the process of production. Gandhāra is therefore more appropriately understood as one visual reference among several rather than as the sole prototype governing Óc Eo Buddhist art.

Among the artefacts discussed, the Loi My wooden Buddha most clearly illustrates the encounter between interregional visual conventions and local choices. Its upright stance, composed face, and relatively balanced overall proportions connect it with the broader anthropomorphic Buddha tradition. By contrast, the wooden medium, concise lines, and lighter visual character distinguish it considerably from Gandhāran stone works. Gia Hao (2023) likewise draws attention to the distinctive features of the Loi My statue within the context of Óc Eo culture. The object suggests that local craftsmen did not merely receive a pre-existing religious image but rearticulated it through production experience familiar to the Mekong Delta.

The simplification observed in Óc Eo Buddhist sculpture should therefore not be equated with technical limitation. Given the use of wood and the tropical environment, deeply carved garments, massive bodily forms, or highly complex surfaces comparable to stone sculpture would not necessarily have been optimal choices. Craftsmen could deliberately favor a more slender silhouette, softer transitions, and a visual form better suited to local devotional spaces. The significance of acculturation lies precisely here: enough of the shared conventions of Buddha representation were retained to make the figure recognizable, while material treatment and formal language acquired distinctive Óc Eo characteristics.

3.2. The Loi My wooden Buddha and the transformation of material

The value of the Loi My wooden Buddha lies not only in its antiquity or rarity. The statue also allows the observer to examine how an interregional Buddhist image type was transferred into a different production environment. Gandhāra is renowned for stone sculpture, where craftsmen could create substantial mass and deeply articulated layers of drapery. At Loi My, the image was executed in wood; consequently, bodily structure, linear rhythm, and the representation of garments had to change. This shift in material was simultaneously a transformation of visual language and highlights the role of local technical experience in the reception of a religious image.

The choice of wood was directly related to the living environment of ancient communities in southern Vietnam. In a deltaic setting, wood was a familiar material in architecture, household objects, and various ritual practices. It was accessible and suitable for carving slender standing forms. By using wood to carve the Buddha, local craftsmen inserted an imported religious symbol into a material system already embedded in everyday life. Scholarship on Óc Eo culture similarly indicates that artefacts from the region frequently reflect flexible adaptation between external elements and local conditions (Nguyen, P. L., 2005). The Loi My statue is therefore both a Buddhist work and evidence of localization in production technique.

Material directly shapes the organization of sculptural form. Stone is well suited to broad masses, deep folds, and pronounced light-shadow contrasts, whereas wood lends itself more readily to fine ridges, smoother surfaces, and elongated bodily forms. When conventions of Buddhist drapery were transferred to wood, they could no longer retain the same thickness and visual weight as in stone sculpture. Garment folds were reduced to lighter lines or moderate transitions. The form changed, yet the sense of solemnity remained. This is a concrete manifestation of acculturation: religious meaning was preserved while the mode of expression was adjusted to local material.

Placed within the broader Southeast Asian context, the Loi My case was not isolated. Brown (1996) observed that Indian artistic conventions were often substantially transformed when they entered Southeast Asian societies, depending on local religious environments and production traditions. From this perspective, the Loi My statue should not be described as a simplified version of Gandhāra. It is the outcome of a process of translation in which an external image type entered a new technical system and was reshaped by the wooden medium and the aesthetic sensibilities of delta communities.

In its visible morphology, the Loi My statue retains features that allow viewers to recognize a Buddhist image: a relatively balanced face, a clearly defined nose, an upright standing posture, and a composed expression. The statue, however, does not emphasize an idealized body or heavy layered garments. Its overall form is slender, concise, and less demonstrative of technical complexity. These differences do not diminish its religious significance. Rather, they show that the image of the Buddha had entered another aesthetic system and developed a distinctive life within Óc Eo culture.

Three layers of elements can be identified in the Loi My statue. The first consists of general conventions of anthropomorphic Buddha imagery, evident in the standing posture and calm spiritual expression. The second includes features that may be associated with Gandhāra, such as the tendency toward facial balance and the emphasis on solemnity. The third, and the layer most decisive in determining the object's appearance, belongs to Óc Eo: the wooden medium, restrained lines, and an organization of mass appropriate to the southern environment. The combination of these layers gives the statue its distinctive place in the history of Buddhist art in Vietnam.

3.3. The role of the Maritime Silk Road in artistic acculturation

Ancient maritime routes were an important condition for the movement of Buddhism and Buddhist imagery from South Asia to Southeast Asia. Compared with overland routes, maritime networks directly connected ports, river mouths, and delta regions where people and goods regularly stopped and exchanged. The Mekong Delta could both supply products and provide access to inland areas, giving it a favorable position within these networks. Based on his research in the delta, Malleret (1959) identified the region's extensive commercial and cultural connections. These relationships created the broader context in which Buddhist symbols could reach Óc Eo.

Óc Eo's role was not limited to receiving products from outside. As a trading centre, it created conditions in which different communities could encounter one another and exchange both material goods and knowledge. Objects, beliefs, production techniques, and concepts of beauty could converge within the same space. In his synthesis of archaeological discoveries concerning Óc Eo, Borell (2014) also emphasized the region's integration into extensive Southeast Asian trade networks. This helps explain how artistic conventions associated with distant Buddhist centres became known and were subsequently reinterpreted in the Mekong Delta.

Complete statues were not the only vehicles through which artistic styles could travel. A small devotional object, an engraved image, jewellery bearing Buddhist symbols, a monk's verbal description, or the memory of a pilgrim could all serve as points of reference for craftsmen. When such references reached Óc Eo, they encountered existing production traditions and a local religious system already undergoing change. Reception therefore necessarily involved selection: some features were retained, some were omitted, and others were expressed through entirely different techniques.

The Maritime Silk Road should consequently be understood as a space of interaction rather than as a one-way route of diffusion. Within this network, Gandhāra may have contributed certain visual conventions; Indian centres provided religious and ritual foundations; intermediary centres in Southeast Asia continued to transform those conventions; and Óc Eo selected and reshaped them according to local conditions. This perspective avoids reducing early Buddhist art in Vietnam to a single external source and clarifies the creative role of the receiving region.

The Loi My statue demonstrates that maritime networks created opportunities for artistic systems to encounter one another, but the final appearance of the artefact was still determined by the Óc Eo environment. Gandhāran influence can be recognized mainly in the broader paradigm of anthropomorphic Buddha imagery and selected conventions of posture; the wooden medium and local techniques changed the mode of expression; and maritime trade provided the conditions through which these elements reached the delta. These three dimensions did not exist separately but interacted within the same process of acculturation.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRESERVING AND PROMOTING THE VALUE OF EARLY BUDDHIST ART IN VIETNAM

Buddhist artefacts associated with Óc Eo culture possess both religious value and importance as evidence for the history of cultural exchange in southern Vietnam. Promoting their value should therefore extend beyond storage or isolated display and should integrate research, conservation, public interpretation, education, and sustainable cultural use. Contemporary heritage research in Vietnam further suggests that heritage memory, cultural identity, emotional attachment to place, and community engagement can strengthen sustainable cultural tourism and the social meaning of heritage (Vu & Nguyen, 2026). Each activity should remain grounded in reliable scholarly documentation while respecting the sacred character and cultural context of the objects.

First, more intensive interdisciplinary research should be undertaken on objects such as the Loi My wooden Buddha. Archaeology can clarify the context of discovery; art history can support stylistic comparison; and materials science and conservation studies can reveal production techniques and the condition of the object. When comparing Óc Eo artefacts with Gandhāra, Amaravati, Gupta, or other Southeast Asian centres, researchers should specify the criteria of comparison and the degree of certainty attached to each interpretation. Such an approach can reduce the tendency to treat Vietnamese artefacts as copies of external centres.

Second, physical conservation should proceed in parallel with digitization. Wooden objects are highly sensitive to humidity, temperature, and biological agents, so environmental monitoring should be carried out regularly. High-resolution photography, three-dimensional scanning, metadata documentation, and records of conservation interventions can create a durable research archive and support future study, exhibition reconstruction, and inter-museum resource sharing. Recent research on digital preservation in Vietnam likewise identifies 3D modelling, metadata systems, cloud storage, and related smart technologies as important tools for heritage preservation, while emphasizing that technological, ethical, financial, and governance constraints must

also be addressed (Nguyen, 2026). Digital documentation should therefore complement, rather than replace, preventive and material conservation of the original object.

Third, museum interpretation should move beyond presenting the statue as a detached antiquity. Exhibitions should explain why Buddhist images appeared in the delta, how they related to maritime exchange, and how local craftsmen transformed external visual conventions. Maps of maritime routes, annotated comparative images, material demonstrations, and multilingual interpretation can make the process of acculturation more intelligible to visitors. Evidence from the Imperial Citadel of Hue indicates that the quality of heritage interpretation, including content, attractiveness, delivery, and the integration of sustainability messages, can encourage more responsible visitor behaviour (Ha et al., 2026). Heritage communication should also incorporate structured community feedback, because participatory communication and localized narratives can improve the relevance and inclusiveness of heritage promotion (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025). Interpretation must clearly distinguish established evidence from hypotheses that remain under investigation.

Finally, knowledge of Óc Eo and early Buddhist art can be incorporated into education in art history, cultural studies, museology, and cultural tourism. Communication products, documentary films, digital exhibitions, and educational programmes can use the visual value of the artefacts, but religious symbols should not be reduced to decorative motifs detached from their historical and sacred meanings. Research in Hanoi suggests that sustainable tourism knowledge, behavioural change, and local community participation can contribute to stronger awareness of cultural heritage conservation (Nguyen, 2025). Involving researchers, Buddhist institutions, museums, educators, and local communities can therefore help ensure that public education and cultural-tourism initiatives remain accurate, participatory, and respectful while also reinforcing heritage memory and place-based identity (Vu & Nguyen, 2026).

V. CONCLUSION

The cases of Óc Eo and the Loi My wooden Buddha show that early Buddhist art in southern Vietnam emerged within a complex context of cultural exchange. The concept of "Indianization" explains only part of this process if it is understood as the one-way transmission of influence. The available evidence is more consistent with a maritime-network perspective in which religious images, production techniques, and aesthetic experience moved through several intermediary points before entering local life.

Gandhāra was an important visual reference, particularly in the development of anthropomorphic Buddha imagery and in conventions for creating solemnity through the face, posture, and robe. The degree of influence, however, should be assessed cautiously. In Óc Eo, these conventions were simplified and transferred into a different material system. The contrast between Gandhāran stone sculpture and wooden statues from the Mekong Delta demonstrates that acculturation was not copying but reinterpretation under specific cultural conditions.

The Loi My wooden Buddha provides a clear example of this reinterpretation. The statue retains basic features of interregional Buddhist imagery, while its massing, surface treatment, and expressive character are closely connected with wood-working techniques and local aesthetic sensibilities. Through this object, the agency of Óc Eo craftsmen becomes visible: they did not stand outside the process of reception but actively selected, adjusted, and made external conventions appropriate to their own devotional environment.

Early Buddhist art in Vietnam should therefore not be viewed as a replica of external artistic centres. It was the result of multiple cultural encounters in which local factors could shape the final form of the artefact. This perspective helps clarify the position of the Mekong Delta in the history of ancient exchange and underscores the need for further interdisciplinary research on artefacts, chronology, transmission routes, and production techniques.

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