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Replication or Restitution? The Modern-day Taxilan Art and Connected Problems

The very word Gandhara evokes a historical memory which predominantly relates to an art tradition. This art is popularly called as Gandhara art, also known as Buddhist and Greco-Buddhist art. It originated and developed in Pakistan and Afghanistan about two thousand years ago. It preponderantly deals with Buddhist themes such as Jataka stories, Buddha's life story, Bodhisattvas and some other minor divinities. The classical period of this art activity is traditionally assigned to the first five centuries of the Common Era.¹ However, recent scholarship also proposes a late period of this art as represented by rock carving in Swat and adjoining areas.² But it is for certain that by the end of the millennium this art tradition had ceased to exist.

Gandhara art is well studied and has fascinated both scholars and commoners over the centuries. It is interesting that at one of the great centres of Gandhara culture, the well-known Taxila, this tradition was revived around the mid-twentieth century. A number of people are involved in what is generally termed as replica-making (figs. 1-3). Some are very famous and pursue a successful career in it while others just use moulds to cast images, of ordinary quality, in cement. This interesting activity as is in vogue at Taxila has multiple aspects which call for proper investigation. In this respect, one of the concerns of this paper is to shed light on the history of this art at the present-day Taxila (hereafter called Taxilan art and Taxilan artist). Moreover, one of the problems is related to il/legality of this practice. It is so far not a legalized activity and profession. Artists and sculptors engaged in this work are facing a number of problems. Another issue is related to forged entries into academic institutions such as museums in the name of original. If the work is legalized, the serious problems of forgery, it may be argued, would be assuaged. Still another problem is the social stigma which the profession entails and the brunt of which is borne by modern sculptors and artists. The artists need to be protected from all sorts of socio-legal obstructions and anomalies. The present study deals with all these issues in addition to questions of subsistence economy of artists associated with the so-called replica-making of Gandhara art. It is to be noted that we refrain from art analysis of iconographic accuracy and resemblance between the historic Gandhara art and the present-day Taxilan art.

We make a case that Taxilan art needs a legal and moral cover. As people's subsistence is linked to this profession, it needs to be preserved. The present study is based on the collection of data with respect to the artists' experiences at Taxila, their problems and degeneration of the skill. It shows the way out of this imbroglio by suggesting legal, social and ethical solutions. People's views and perceptions have also been documented and analyzed.

Data Collections

The data as presented in this study was collected during three field visits to Taxila in 2017-2018. Each visit comprised many days. People belonging to different walks of life were approached, interviewed and engaged in in-depth discussions about the topic. They were common people of Taxila, officials of the Taxila Museum and Taxilan artists and those engaged in the business of this new form of Gandhara art. Our interviews and discussions with them were mainly aimed to know and understand the following four point:

1. The history of the Taxilan art
2. The legal status of and problems with this new form of an historical art
3. Its appreciation and importance in relation to the subsistence and economy of Taxila
4. The society's response to image-makers and sculptors in the area

The number of common people, as their opinions were solicited, was between 60 and 70. They ranged from shopkeepers to teachers, school students, passerby women and aged/retired inhabitants. Many artists, including a high-profile name, were visited and interviewed. Many of them were available at the famous sites of Dharmarajika and Sirkap. The officials of Taxila Museum, including guards and peons, were met with within

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the premises of the Museum and at sites. The major thrust of the data presentation as follows is in the form of narration.

The Taxilan Art and Artists

Let us start with an enquiry of historical nature. What is the historical context of the Taxilan artists who have been in the footsteps of Gandhara artists? We were specifically interested in understanding this question. In this connection, we do confess that we had not been to the field as what is called *tabula rasa*. We had, *a priori*, assumed that this activity might have come down to the present times uninterruptedly from the period of Gandhara civilization, a journey of almost two millennia. But to our surprise, we were grossly mistaken. We found that it was since around the mid-twentieth century that some local people, having minor jobs in the Taxila Museum, started making sculptures and images in the tradition of the historical Gandhara art. Since then this activity got momentum and became a tradition in itself through a proper training and skills development.

Presently, famous names of sculptors are those of Shafique and Iftikhar. They are highly venerated by academicians and institutions both from Pakistan and abroad. The latter is said to have had been associated with a recent project on the archaeology of Taxila. In its framework was excavated the Bhamala Buddhist complex by a joint Pak-American team.³ Iftikhar was also brought to Quaid-i-Azam University during a course so as to orientate students to experimental archaeology. He worked for days to show the students how sculptures, in the Gandhara fashion, were being made. He also made a niche in Gandhara masonry in the small Museum here (Figs. 4-5). We also found, during our fieldwork, that the number of artists working in stone, has, with the passage of time, reduced while those using cement are still numerous. Stone – both green and black schist – was said as being imported from Swat valley. As about the legal questions: both archaeology officials and those related to the making and selling of images were found on the same page. Both considered it crucial to provide legal cover to this activity. Two officials told us that though the activity was prohibited but still they considered it useful to legalize and streamline it. One even expressed that (replica) making should also be projected and institutionalized. Another said that as (replica) art was illegal, people who were found as engaged were prohibited from making them. Even police were also being called up to arrest, especially brokers; though generally such an extreme step was avoided. Previously, some officials were also mentioned as vehement and ruthless enough to pursue poor vendors in order to stop them from work. Another official responded that the activity was illegal and fake material were confiscated and sent to the museum. The punishment for transaction in replicas is not so much severe as it is in relation to supplying original works out of the country.

Those who were related to the making and supplying of images and sculptures were curious enough about discussing legal matters. They were very much annoyed by legal restrictions which are in place. They made desperate arguments in favour of legalizing their art and activity. They complained that foreign visitors to Taxila wanted to buy their images. However, when it comes to them that they would not be allowed, on airport, to take these pieces with themselves, they decline to purchase. It was also reported that there was no serious problem with respect to the supply and transaction of Taxilan images within the country. Some were perturbed by the fact that obstacles were created for the poor artists and dealers and the elite and popular ones were enjoying freedom of sorts. Since the workers' economy and subsistence are intertwined with this profession, they were also seriously thinking regarding its legalization. The mechanism, as some suggested, was issuance of licenses and appointment of some government officials responsible for dispensing with (replica-making) issues such as, both local and international, exhibition, transaction and export. And all this, according to them, could turn as helpful with respect to the promotion of the art of image-making at Taxila in the Gandhara tradition.

Another aspect of Taxilan art relates to people's subsistence. It has been an important component of local economy. However, due to the current law and order situation in the country, beside the legal restrictions, those involved in this activity are facing financial problems. The workers are doing this business in a situation marked by fear and social and legal constraints. Continuous raids from the Museum employees make an immense problem for them. Similarly, reduction in foreign tourism has also affected the business. It was reported that, before 9/11, foreign visitors would normally pay about 5, 10 or 12 dollars per piece. Nowadays, local tourists rarely offer just 100, 200 or maximally 300 rupees for the same. It was also revealed that stone images were sold at higher cost than pieces made of cement. Nevertheless, it was also pointed out that working in stone was an arduous job which needed more time and laborious efforts. As presently the business is on the verge of decline, the number of its workers has seen considerable decrease. Very few people now pursue the profession and that too in a desperate way. One person told us that he had provided sculptures to Lok Virsa, Islamabad, but it was since one long month that nothing had been sold from his pieces. He was thinking of saying bid to the profession as so many others had already done the same. Some artists also suggested that there should be an elaborate apparatus for promoting this art and its business. They envisaged that they would be happy to display

their works if exhibitions and workshops were formally arranged. It may also be noted that some workers lack any other skills and they and their families are totally dependent on whatever they earn from this (so-called replica) business.

The social stigma is another central issue which image-making entails in Muslim societies. Theoretically, at least, iconophiles are severely despised and iconoclasts venerated. Sometimes, it could be so severe as to cause social exclusion. The Taxilan artist is by no means any exception. The situation in the area is also not much different. It was reported to us that religious clerics often talk against the art. However, one interviewee told us that this problem was not as severe as the one created by police and archaeology officials. He rather dared to say that they could not abandon their profession despite the antagonistic behavior and vilifying wishes of opponents. In order to know the views of the wider public, we took the issue to streets and bazars as well as to schools etc. More than 60 persons, across gender, age and profession, were talked to. They were asked as how they would like to see image-making and its business as was in vogue at Taxila. Twelve persons were of the view that there was nothing wrong in pursuing all this. Thirty-eight others considered it as highly undesirable from religious point of view. Another twelve interviewees were moderate in the sense that they affirmed image-making as an art activity which, at the same time, could also be irksome ideologically. Even a worker in the art, named Sajad, felt bitter remorse that he could not but serve this *haram* (according to Islamic law: earnings through unfair means) earning to his family.

The present-day Taxilan art as a historical reenactment

Keeping in view the above data, a number of important insights could be presented with respect to the creation of art at Taxila. We would critically ponder upon the related legal issues, economic situation and the social inclusion and acceptability of Taxilan artist. In order to make a case for its legalization, we need to approach Taxilan art with a debate in forgery and authenticity. In popular academic parlance, the sculptures and images as presently produced in the area are termed and considered as replicas/copies. This denomination carries only partial truth. Since the Taxilan artist and sculptor belong to a different socio-religious and temporal horizon, it can hardly be expected from them to know Buddhism as a religion, let alone its philosophical and theological intricacies. The Gandharan artist, in contrast, was certainly far better located. They were embedded to the monastic environs, at least, by dint of profession if not in terms of faith. Hence, their firsthand experience with Buddhist metaphysics and ontology as well as hagiographies. No doubt, the art created in such an environment, having its unique mark, was destined to receive great appreciation and respectability since the colonial times to our own. Related to this is another important fact as well: the cessation of this art activity sometime in the latter first millennium CE. And it is obvious that its socio-religious memory, all through the medieval period, plucked into a historical oblivion. However, it was reinstated in the process of colonization to a certain extent, if not entirely, and not always with positive intentions.⁴ That this forgotten cultural landscape was brought, by orientalist, to the fore is one thing, its historical performance by the Taxilan artist is another. Both to be admired. The former set the stage for the latter performance. The one explored and produced the history; the other has been reenacting it. This Mnemosynic bliss – the so-called replica of Gandhara art – also embodies an intrinsic originality and authenticity of its own. The Taxilan artist reenacts as a Gandharan artist and replicates their work. And it is here that the boundary between fake and authentic from the actual art perspective blurs; though, a critical observation on this notion from the viewpoint of distinct historical and socio-religious context shall be reserved. Our position gets further strength from another fact as well. The academic concerns notwithstanding, the Taxilan artist creates an art which relates to one of the great living religions, Buddhism. Its followers are in millions throughout the world. They can still put great demands, as we found during our fieldwork, for these images, a situation which questions modernity's discourse of replica/original and fake/authentic. For the faithful devotees they are as valuable and original as the art of historical Gandhara or another Buddhist universe.

As referred to above, the present-day Taxilan art, in the Gandhara tradition, became possible in the result of colonial knowledge production. There are other such abundant instances as well; the most fascinating one, amongst others, being the historical restitution of Alexander of Macedonia. His memory was revitalized by the vested imperialists.⁵ It was subsequently variously adapted and appropriated in contexts such as Indian nationalism and ethnic pride of Pukhtuns, Punjabis etc.⁶ An important contrast shall be noted here. Alexander continues to serve elite politics and vested interests while Taxilan art belongs to the social fringe of Pakistan. The latter is all about ordinary inhabitants' subsistence and well-being. Art and archaeology are expediently used in the best interest of political polarization in modern-day South Asia.⁷ Hindu identitarian politics may particularly be mentioned with respect to Sri Aurobindo's indifference towards Gandhara art.⁸ It is fortunate that Taxilan artist has not yet been polluted in this manner. But they are certainly haunted by the specter of social and economic insecurity. Adding legal cover to their profession can save them.

The Taxilan art and its business are not considered as per archaeological ethics and legislation by officials and archaeology workers. Due to this, those who sell these art pieces are often subjected to raids by police or the archaeological officials. We are of the view that a legal cover may be provided to this artistic activity not only for the sake of art but in the interest of those for whom it is a source of livelihood. We believe that certified workers, as suggested by some high-profile artists, can better work in collaboration with government institutions and other responsible bodies. A good idea it is if it does not discriminate against the fringe artists and dealers at Taxila. Let us turn to another crucially relevant point. We know that fake pieces' entry into museums has been an issue of great concern. Replicas can be transacted in the name of originals. And this issue remains an anathema to academics and researchers. While discussing Indians' interest in antiquities, i.e. coins, during the colonial period, Daniel Michon touches upon the issue of forgery. He states that 'there were the ever present, anonymous "market dealers" who supplied the Europeans with, literally, tens of thousands of coins. . . . We learn from early European travelogues that Punjab was populated by counterfeiters ready to sell their goods to any buyers.' He further says that 'Indians knew the pictorial content and method of manufacture of these coins intimately, so much so that they could produce passable fakes that plagued European collectors.' Michon goes on to elaborate this point in a footnote: 'The problem of forgeries, particularly of coins, plagued not only early antiquarians, but continued to be an issue well into the colonial period.'⁹ No doubt, this is a serious problem in the process of knowledge production especially if in ignorance replicated images are dealt with as original works. Many examples in this respect can be presented.¹⁰ We maintain that by legalizing and institutionalizing Taxilan images and sculptures, this danger can be mitigated.

Moreover, such an approach towards the Taxilan art will also help popularize Gandharan archaeology. It is in line with Sir Mortimer Wheeler's idea and practice of engaging people in doing archaeology.¹¹ He was busy in making archaeology visible to the public through selling not only extra and unimportant original pieces but also replicas to visitors during his excavations in England. Gabriel Moshenska has conceptualized all this as 'archaeological commodity relations' in his efforts to present a definition of public archaeology.¹² It was at Maiden Castle, between 1934 and 1937, that Wheeler 'and his colleagues pioneered the concept of the spectacle of excavation as a commodity that was created, marketed and sold to the public alongside the now more common archaeological commodities such as artefacts, postcards, and pamphlets.'¹³ Wheeler makes advocacy for such a practice in the case of archaeology everywhere in the world.¹⁴ And we are confident to assert that in the light of the concept of public and popular archaeology, it is rather impossible to deny the multiple importance of Taxilan art.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of Taxilan art in the tradition of the historical Gandhara art is interesting from many angles. First of all, it is a fascinating instance of the revival of a religious art which had not been part of collective memory for more than a millennium. Its revitalization was specifically caused by the situations of European colonialism. However, its special significance emanates from its social character as constituted by local aesthetics as well as marginality. It is the reenactment of Gandharan artist's performance which deserves our favourable attention in terms of sponsorship and promotion of Taxilan art. Moreover, this activity caters for livelihood of a great number of poverty-stricken people of Taxila. And both these considerations shall prompt us to make advocacy for its rescue from the imminent disappearance. It is also interesting to note how the overarching historical development of India's colonization resulted into another, and more important, situation: bringing back the lost memory of the tradition of Gandhara art. It may be firmly said that the so-called replica-making at Taxila contains aspects of historical, social and economic vitality. The need of the time is to deal it in

a prudent way lest this astonishing art activity again drifts into what is called historical amnesia.



Figure 1. The Buddha image; Taxilan art



Figure 2. Buddha flanked by Bodhisattva Maitreya; Taxilan art



Figure 3. Narrative relief; Taxilan art



Figure 4. Prepared in the tradition of Gandhara art and architecture by the Taxilan artist Iftikhar. Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations. Courtesy: Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad



Figure 5. A closeup of Bodhisattva Maitreya as can be seen in figure 1. By the Taxilan artist Iftikhar. Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations. Courtesy: Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad

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