

ACANTHUS LEAVES IN GANDHARA ART: A SYMBOL OR A DECORATIVE PATTERN

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Acanthus is one of the significant ancient motifs that has been widely used in the arts of almost all the major religions of the world including Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. The depiction of symbols and motifs were common in world arts to represent a specific theme or sometimes used merely as an ornamental motif. Acanthus leaves occupy a distinctive eminence in most of the world arts. In ancient Greek and Roman sculptural arts usually, they appear as a funerary symbol and are depicted on gravestones. Acanthus symbolizes life, immortality, and rebirth. They were also used as decorative motifs. Acanthus motif, specifically in Gandharan Art has not been discussed in detail. This paper aims to identify different styles of acanthus, its evaluation, and development over the years. It also analyzes the representation of acanthus in Gandhara art, through a critical and qualitative approach that classifies whether acanthus has been used as a symbol or merely an ornamental motif. Different panels of Gandhara Art specifically focussing on the acanthus motif is being discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Gandhara Art, Acanthus, Greek, and Roman.

Introduction

A single leaf or array of leaves expresses the beauty of nature and thus is integrated as ornamentation in the art and architecture

universally. The incorporation of leaves in art and architecture offers a lively look when arranged with various skills and techniques.

“The plant acanthus weaves its coils, a brilliant sight to see, whose marvel will delight your soul”. (Theocritus cited by Hauglid 1950).¹

Acanthus leaves have been frequently used in art and architecture from remote times until the present because of its well-cut saw-toothed margins and rhythmical curves. They appear to be the most common architectural motif employed to decorate the Corinthian capitals. Their depiction in the western arts predominantly has symbolic implications. It is considered one of the oldest decorative motifs in classical architecture. In ancient Greek and Roman sculptural arts usually, they appear as a funerary symbol. In Christian art, the frequent representation of acanthus leaf, sometimes embellishing the Corinthian capitals and other architectural elements, symbolizes heaven.²

It also emerged in the various Buddhist arts of South Asia evolving into an intricate design. Besides other foreign motifs such as cupids, tritons, marine divinities, and vine, acanthus leaves too are depicted abundantly in Gandhara art. They appear variously in Gandhara art; sometimes adorning the Corinthian pilasters in the narrative panels, bordering the panels depicting various scenes from the life story of Buddha and as a background of Buddha images, etc. Few specimens from western arts are also incorporated to offer a comparative analysis.

Symbolic Significance of Acanthus

Acanthus symbolizes life, immortality, horns of the lunar crescent, and reverence of arts in Mediterranean countries. The first instance of acanthus can be found in Greek monumental and funerary art, so it was associated with death and mourning.³ In Greek mythology, the spiky, barbed bushes, and herbs were often considered as a bad omen under the power of the underworld. It was also used to prevent the dead people from returning to plague the earth.⁴ As a cult statue, the first Corinthian column was found at an internal Ionic colonnade, became an item of worship. Acanthus capital at the Temple of Apollo also implies the specific veneration images.

Ornamental Significance of Acanthus

Acanthus was popular not merely symbolically but also as a decorative motif in the world. In the beginning, acanthus was depicted

along with palmette for visual effects. The common use of acanthus can be noticed in the Hellenistic period.⁵

As ornamentation, acanthus inspired affluent imagination, first on the funerary stele, and later on the, capitals of the columns as well.⁶ As an architectural augmentation, acanthus spread further to the Roman Empire. It also became part of Buddhist art in India and China, and thereafter in the Islamic world as well.⁷ Its finest ornamental role can be observed in Romanesque capitals. Cluny hemicycle capitals, which were utterly decorative. Acanthus was initially a symbol of death but later it became the symbol of life.

Origin and Meaning of Acanthus

Acanthus is a plant family having almost 30 species found in tropical and warm temperate regions, with an origin in the Mediterranean and Asia.⁸ The word acanthus, 'thorn'(*akantha*) derives from Greek probably due to ace (sharp point) and Anthos 'flower', which means thorn cover leaves as a thorny flower.⁹

'Vitruvius (75-15 BCE) recounts the story about the origin of acanthus that acanthus leaves as a pattern were initiated by the Greek architect and sculptor, Callimachus who was inspired by the sight of a basket left on the grave of a young girl. Legends narrate the story behind the basket of acanthus leaves that, after the death of a young girl, her nurse placed her belongings in a basket on her grave, and the basket contained child's toys. An acanthus plant started to grow around and through the basket, mixing its leaves with the weave of the basket. One day, the sculptor Callimachus observed this arrangement and he was inspired to design the motif as a column ornament.¹⁰ And he was credited as the inventor of the Corinthian order, for using the same images in architecture (Plate: 1). Another version has it that Callimachus, renowned Athenian architect, and sculptor of 15th century BCE was working on pillars at Corinth. One day, while walking he noticed a basket covered with a large piece of tile. The basket was lying down the ground and the roots of the acanthus plant coated with the basket. The sophistication of the blend inspired the architect (Callimachus) and he embraced the pattern with acanthus leaves for the capital of pillars.¹¹

Acanthus leaf developed from palmette motif design.¹² The curvy leaves of the acanthus became the main element of the Corinthian capital. The adornment of the buildings not only represent the construction and style but also bear the feelings of dignity, authority, and magnificence.¹³

It was a common trend in ancient times to associate the ornamentation of majestic buildings with the dignity of divinity or the state.



Plate: 1-

Depiction of Acanthus leaves on Corinthian capital

(source: website, bobvila.com)

([Acanthus leaves motif on Corinthian capital](#) 7th April 2019).

Being an herbaceous plant acanthus is an ideal symbol of regeneration. The origin of acanthus can be traced back from 450-420 BCE, with the earliest example in the temple of Apollo Epicurus at Basse.¹⁴ Various species of acanthus have been found throughout the region of Mediterranean, in which two types are commonly found in early architecture, *Acanthus spinous* and *Acanthus mollis*. The *spinous* acanthus has thin, sharp, and pointed lobes of Greek origin while the other one has broad, dull, and soft of the Romans.¹⁵ (Plate: 2).



Plate: 2

Acanthus used as in the architectural design (source: website, bobvila.com).

([Acanthus architectural design](#) 7th April 2019*)



Plate: 3

Acanthus used in a Greek funerary building (Grossman, Janet Burnet., *Greek Funerary Sculpture, A catalogue of the collections at the Getty Villa, California* [Christopher Hudson], 2001, Pg. 147).

Acanthus appeared for the first time in Greek monumental art (Plate: 3) frequently on burials urns, which show a definite relationship between the plant and the tomb. Thorny and spikey bushes of acanthus were considered as a sign of bad luck under the power of the underworld. It is believed that acanthus leaves were used to prevent dead people from returning to haunt earth.¹⁶ Thorny acanthus also possesses special significance in sepulchral¹⁷ art.

Acanthus is a native of southern Europe and is considered a classical part of ancient Greek culture.¹⁸ It mostly adorns the capitals of Corinthian columns. According to Smith¹⁹,

“The first record of acanthus leaves in funerary architecture was found on the grave of a young girl. It was inspired to use them to decorate the capital of the column. The use of acanthus in architecture derives from the fact that the leaves are thorny and have often been used as a symbol of the snappy journey of life to death and ultimately the final triumph of eternal life”.

Also, when it comes to funerary art, acanthus symbolizes “the heavenly garden”. It is one of the oldest cemetery motifs, associated with the ‘rock ground’ where most ancient Greek cemeteries were placed. Acanthus plant was probably introduced for a decorative purpose. The use of acanthus in funeral rites and on gravestones during the Greek

period also indicates the link of this plant with the protection against evil spirits.

Although many variants of the style are known, the principal component was the acanthus leaf, a symbol of death and rebirth. In Architecture, acanthus appeared on capitals, friezes, panels, and modillions.²⁰ The usage of acanthus reached its zenith during the Byzantine period, in which many buildings bearing acanthus motifs can be found.²¹ Acanthus motif can also be observed in medieval art and including manuscripts. The Renaissance saw an absolute explosion of acanthus leaves, in architecture, sculptures, paintings, tapestries, furniture, and textiles.

It also became part of Buddhist art in South Asia, and China, developing a complicated. Arabesque without religious connotation in the Islamic world. Acanthus is most ornamental in *Romanesque*.²² Several acanthus motifs have been depicted in Gandhara art. The decoration of acanthus is unique in this art.²³

Generally, there are four types of acanthus in different eras that can be observed, depicted as a decorative motif or an element in art and architecture (Plate: 4). The symbolism and meaning associated with Acanthus are enduring life. This plant is usually seen at funerary occasions. In Christianity, acanthus leaves represent pain, sin, and punishment. Acanthus generally symbolizes mortality in the Mediterranean countries.²⁴ Acanthus as well as acanthus scroll both were used as a decorative element, whereas acanthus was depicted as a scroll in the classical world (Plate: 5).

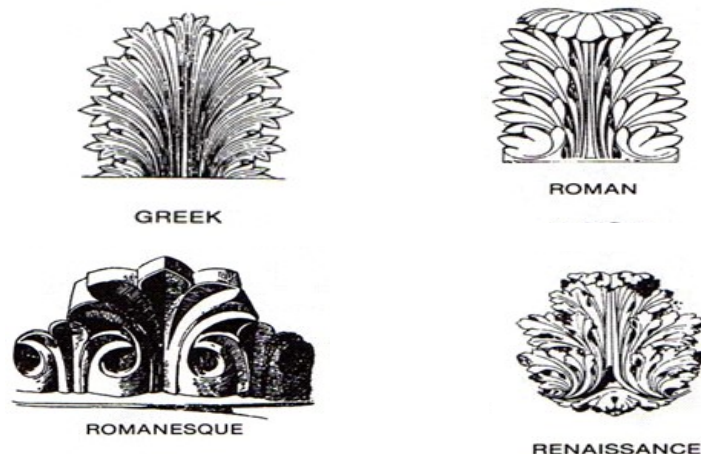


Plate: 4

Representation of acanthus leaves (motif) in different eras
([Acanthus leaf](#) 11th April 2019).

**Plate: 5**

Representation of Acanthus scroll (source: website, buffalo.com)
([Acanthus scrolls](#) 11th April 2019).

Acanthus in Gandharan Art

Gandhara art, which retains local features and novelty, originated in the 1st century BCE and declined with the invasion of White Huns in 5th Century C.E, is purely a religious art, the purpose of this art was to propagate Buddhist religion through visual representation.²⁵ The uncertain relation of Gandhara art with Greco-Roman art, its chronology, and development is of great interest.²⁶ The location of ancient Gandhara, over the crossways of Europe and Asia, played an important role in the fusion of arts, culture, and religion. Though the art of this region (Gandhara) was religious it also has had foreign motifs or influences illustrated in their arts. It was due to the several rulers of this region, including Indo-Greeks, Scythians, Parthians, Kushans, who left their impact. Several periods of progression in Gandhara art can be observed, and each era improves the features of a past trend. The details of these periods are as under:

Period I:

This period dates from the 2nd century to the 1st century BCE, and the prominent features of this era are Greek classical style followed for sculptural art, terracotta, and pottery.²⁷

Period II:

This period dates from 1st century BCE to 1st century C.E, in this era, new motifs and themes were introduced by Parthians, whereas Scythians append anthropomorphic²⁸ representations, later considered as the base of Buddhist art.²⁹

Period III:

Era that dates from 2nd to 3rd century C.E, introduced the blend of western style into Buddhist symbolism by the Kushans.

Acanthus leaf is one of the foreign architectural motifs that are abundantly found in Gandhara Art, mostly depicted over the Corinthian, upper registers of the panels, sometimes at the back of the Buddha, over the plinth and in figured Corinthians as well. The variety of depiction of acanthus is divided into the following groups and discussed accordingly:

Acanthus depiction in upper and lower registers of the panel:

The relief panel (Plate: 6) depicts ‘the dream of Queen Maya’. She is lying on a couch, her head is over the pillow, keeping her left hand under her head and right hand in front, over the couch. The provenance of this relief is ‘*Butkara I*’ (Swat), and now it is displayed in the ‘Archaeological Museum, Saidu Sharif, Swat’ Pakistan (hereafter Swat Museum).



Plate: 6

Dream of Queen Maya depiction, gray schist, from Swat Museum
(Photograph by the authors, Courtesy Swat Museum).

This relief is enclosed by Gandharan Persepolitan semi columns on either side. The upper register of the relief is decorated with a row of vertical separate acanthus leaves with plain leaves behind, which also symbolize birth as this relief depicted the dream in which the indication of birth of ‘Prince Siddhartha’ was indirectly given to Queen Maya. This is the earliest type of Roman nonstylized acanthus, that has been illustrated in this panel. Roman acanthus is found in two styles, the stylized and

carved foliage while the other one is plain and straight as shown in this panel. In Gandhara Art, acanthus has been widely used in most of the sculptures as an architectural motif, whereas some of them have symbolic representation.

The relief panel (Plate: 7) is divided into two segments. The provenance of this relief panel is Varia³⁰ collection, Swat and now it is displayed in Swat Museum. The upper part depicts two Buddhas seated in '*Dhyana Mudra*³¹' bordered by Corinthian pilasters. Whereas in the lower part, Buddha is standing with four other standing figures. Two of them had bowls in their hands and offering to Buddha, Vajrapani is also depicted in this relief.

The upper register of this panel is decorated with a row of vertical separate acanthus leaves, with elaborated and stylized curly ends of the leaves. The curly leaves acanthus are the elaborated form that Romans introduced in architecture. Greeks and Romans both used acanthus abundantly in architecture as a decorative ornament. This was later adopted by Byzantine, Romanesque, and Gothic architecture as well. Spaces on either side are decorated with a row of reverse ogival³² leaf motifs.



Plate: 7

Offering of bowls to Buddha, Black Schist, from Swat Museum

(Photograph by the authors, Courtesy Swat Museum).

The relief panel (Plate: 8), depicts a seated Bodhisattva, that is badly damaged. He is holding a lotus in his hands. The upper register of the panel is broken, while the lower register is decorated with a vertical

inverted Roman acanthus scroll. Roman acanthus is commonly found in Gandhara art panels, over the registers or Corinthians. Acanthus scroll is purely used as an ornamental motif rather symbolic.



Plate: 8

Panel showing seated Bodhisattva, Light Grey Schist, H. 18.3 cm, W. 18.5 cm, D. 11.4 cm, Provenance Kafir Kot. The British Museum, (Zwalf. W, A Catalogue of the Gandhara Sculpture in the British Museum, London [The British Museum Press], 1996, Fig 115).

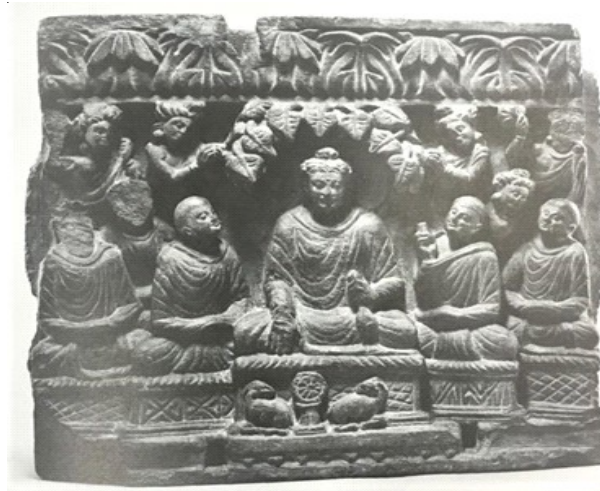


Plate: 9

Panel showing Buddha with worshipper, Grey Schist, (Zwalf. W, A Catalogue of the Gandhara Sculpture in the British Museum, London [The British Museum Press], 1996, Fig 199).

A relief panel, showing a seated Buddha with a worshipper (Plate: 9) is fully decorated with foliage and motifs. The upper register

is decorated with heavy broad leaves acanthus of the Renaissance period. The acanthus motif in the renaissance period was more stylistic, and blend of the previous era motifs. The leaves of acanthus are more curvy and blended rather other periods and heavy foliage can also be observed later in the Renaissance era. In this panel, the heavy foliage of verticle acanthus is used merely as a decorative motif to enhance its appeal.

It was very common since the early Gandharan art till the modern era to decorate relief panels. This panel (Plate: 10) is a broken garland bearer, showing *amorini* with long hair and broad eyes, supporting the bearer. The upper is partially faded and decorated with broadleaf, curved Roman acanthus with pointed edges. This style of acanthus motif is commonly found in Gandhara art. The rest of the panel is plain, except the upper part.



Plate: 10

Broken panel showing Garland bearer, Grey Schist, H. 19.5 cm, W. 38.5 cm, D. 4.5 cm, Provenance Kalawan, Peshawar, (Khan, Muhammad Bahadur, A Catalogue of the Gandhara Stone Sculptures in the Taxila Museum, [Department of Archaeology and Museums], 2004, Fig 325).

This relief (Plate: 11) panel showing ‘exchanging of clothes by prince Siddhartha’ is enclosed by a Gandharan Corinthian pilaster, used to support the panel and for adornment as well. This panel is displayed in Swat Museum. In Roman and Greek funerary art, there are many examples in which acanthus, rosette, and palmette have been depicted together. The upper, lower register, and the columns that enclose the relief panel usually depict the decorative motifs, as in this panel the upper part of the register is decorated with a row of vertical separate acanthus

leaves with plain leaves behind. In this panel acanthus may symbolize grief as when at the age of nineteen Prince Siddhartha visited a city, he noticed the suffering of the people and he observed a few of the scenes more that day which made him aware of the painful aspects of life.



Plate: 11

Panel showing exchanging of clothes by prince Siddhartha, from Swat Museum, (Photograph by the authors, Courtesy Swat Museum).

The relief panel (Plate: 12) is depicting the 'great departure scene'. This relief is displayed in Taxila Museum. Siddhartha appears on his horse, while on the left side Mara is also depicted in this panel. The acanthus may symbolize pain and grief in this panel, on the departure of prince Siddhartha. Three acanthus motifs having a pointed edge, sharp and curved leaves can be observed in this panel.



Plate: 12

Panel depicting the Great Departure, Black Schist, H. 23 cm, W. 20.5 cm, D. 5.7 cm, Provenance Ram Das collection, Peshawar, (Khan, Muhammad Bahadur, A Catalogue of the Gandhara Stone Sculptures in the Taxila Museum, [Department of Archaeology and Museums], 2004, Fig 15).



Plate: 13

Panel showing Attack of Mara, Grey schist, H. 39 cm, W. 61 cm, Provenance Jamal Garhi, Mansehra, (Ihsan, Qazi, *Gandharan Sculptures in the Peshawar Museum*), 2008, p. 111).

Relief depicting Attack of Mara (Plate: 13) is badly damaged, the upper part is decorated with the same acanthus foliage as used in (Plate: 12).

Acanthus depiction in Corinthian Pilasters:

According to Owen Jones (1956)³³

“The Corinthian order in architecture was said to have been suggested by an acanthus leaf found growing around an earthen port; but the acanthus leaf existed as an ornament long before, or, at all events, the principle of its growth was observed in conventional ornaments. It was the peculiar application of this leaf to the formation of the capital of a column which was the sudden invention that created the Corinthian order”.

The oldest perception about pillars or columns dates to tree and pillar symbols used in Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, Assyria, Phoenicia, and Egypt. The tree icon symbolizes a gateway to the dwelling of the blessed. Pillar symbols relate to a stylized form of a tree, with the idea of an alignment or communicating with the eternal.³⁴ It was very common in ancient Greek and Roman architecture to decorate the Corinthian capitals with acanthus leaves. The friezes, dentils, and other decorated areas were also adorned with acanthus. There are many types of Corinthians,

categorized by the adornment in Gandhara art. Few of them are shown as under:



Plate: 14

Panel depicting great departure scene, from Hund Museum
(Photograph by the authors, Courtesy Hund Museum).

In the relief depicting “Great Departure” (Plate: 14), displayed in Hund Museum, Swabi, a Corinthian pilaster has been used to separate the relief and enhance the aesthetics. Corinthian used in this panel is common and a typical Roman leaves acanthus is used to decorate the pilaster. This is the un adorned Corinthian, typically used between the panels to separate one scene from another.

A relief panel (Plate 15) depicting two scenes of offering to Buddha. The upper part of the panel is decorated with a row of saw teeth. There are two Corinthian capitals inside the panel separating either scene from one another. These Corinthian pilasters are used as a basic architectural element used in Gandhara and other world arts to decorate and support the panel. This is the typical and common style Corinthian, decorated with typical Roman acanthus leaves over the shaft. This panel is displayed in the Swat Museum.

In Gandharan art, figured Corinthians are also very common, sometimes Buddha is shown sitting in the center of the capitals, and sometimes portrayal of any decorative motif or figure, (bejeweled female or bust of female), Bodhisattva, Vajrapani or worshipper has been observed.

The Corinthian pilaster (Plate: 16) is shown with a figure standing in the center. The figure on the shaft of the pilaster is defaced and joins his hands together as a worshipper. The upper part of the capital of this Corinthian is decorated with the Roman acanthus inverted leaves. The

gods or the supreme power portrayal over the Corinthian is observed in ancient Greek and Roman art also.



Plate: 15

Frieze showing scenes of offering to Buddha, from Swat Museum
(Photograph by the authors, Courtesy Swat Museum).



Plate: 16

Figured Corinthian pilaster, Dark Grey schist, H. 33 cm, W. 17 cm, D. 5.5 cm,
Provenance Dharmarajika, Peshawar, (Khan, Muhammad Bahadur, A Catalogue of
the Gandhara Stone Sculptures in the Taxila Museum, [Department of Archaeology
and Museums], 2004, Fig 240).

A relief depicting a departure scene (Plate: 17) is enclosed by two Corinthians on either side. The upper part of the Corinthian is

ornamented with single dropped acanthus, on the shaft, there is a figure probably representing Buddha sitting over a full-blown lotus. The decorated pilasters or Corinthians with figures of gods, goddesses, a prince was very common in Greek and Roman culture. Which portrays their royalty and supreme power, the figured Corinthians in Gandhara art may be foreign inspired. There are several examples in Gandhara art, where figured Corinthians have been found with versatile figures including, devotees, Buddha, female depiction, Bodhisattvas, etc. Buddha is portrayed on all four sides, whereas one side is being pitted out probably.



Plate: 17

Panel showing the departing Visvamtara making a gift, Grey Schist, H. 24.1 cm, W. 55.9 cm, D. 6.5 cm, Provenance unknown, (Zwalf. W, A Catalog of the Gandhara Sculpture in the British Museum, London [The British Museum Press], 1996, Fig 130).

The relief panel (Plate: 18), is depicting an offering scene. On the left side, there is a figured ornamented Corinthian, used to separate the scene. The feature of this Corinthian is the same as discussed in Plate: 17, center or shaft of the pillar is decorated with a royal figure sitting over a full-blown lotus. The upper part is decorated with a mixture of an Egyptian bell shape and typical Roman leaf acanthus. Same Corinthian pillar but without having any figure is also used in the panel, but the figured Corinthian is large as well as this pattern is being followed on either side. This type of Corinthian is very much common in Gandhara art, displayed in several museums.

The same example with a few different features can also be observed in the panel showing Buddha with his devotees (Plate: 19). On the right side, the panel is enclosed with a figured Corinthian pillar. There is a figure standing on the pillar, maybe a devotee or a worshipper,

joining both hands. The upper part of the Corinthian is decorated with the typical Roman acanthus, likewise in many other Gandharan panels. This panel is now displayed in Hund Museum (Mardan). In most of the panels, typical Roman and Greek acanthus leaf pattern is used to decorate the Corinthians.



Plate: 18

Panel showing seated Buddha, from Swat Museum
(Photograph by the authors, Courtesy Swat Museum).



Plate: 19

Panel depicting Buddha with his devotees, from Hund Museum
(Photograph by the authors, Courtesy Hund Museum).

Acanthus depiction on Corinthian Capitals with a figure

There is a variety of Corinthians in Gandhara, in some cases, the capitals of the Corinthians are adorned with figures and multiple foliages, which not only represent royal patronage but are also symbolic.

In Greek mythology, it is said that when the god Apollo desired the nymph 'Acantha'. to resist Acantha scratched the face of god Apollo. He became furious and took his revenge by turning Acantha into a thorny or spiky plant (Acanthus).³⁵ It was very common in the Greek era to depict different deities in the center of the panel or Corinthian's capital with heavy foliage of acanthus for religious manifestation. Later, this pattern was being followed in Gandharan art as well, Buddha portrayed in the center and acanthus may symbolize protective element. Some of the examples of figured capitals are discussed below:

A seated Buddha (Plate: 20) covered with foliage of acanthus leaves as well as other floral and architectural motifs. On the right, there is a devotee in a standing position. Buddha is shown seated all around the classical acanthus, which represent royal supremacy and give him protection. As the study reveals that acanthus was being used for multiple purposes and one of the purposes was to act as an antidote to snake venom³⁶. In early architecture, mostly these two types of acanthus "*spinous* , and *mollis*" have been used. Later, the classical acanthus motif introduced itself, it was the amalgamation of two types of acanthus that was being used earlier more stylistic and having broad leaves. The features of acanthus spinous and mollis were intensely cut leaves, which gave a detailed and realistic component to the columns, capitals, borders, etc.³⁷ Both kinds of acanthus with more curved and elongated leaves are used to decorate the capital. There are two acanthus mollis motifs, making as an umbrella for a Buddha, giving him protection. In this Corinthian capital, the umbrella of acanthus symbolizes protection. Hence, the lower part of the capital is decorated with the same pattern except for the figure of Buddha.



Plate: 20

Corinthian capital showing seated Buddha, Provenance unknown, (Rahman, Abdur & others, *Professor Ahmad Hasan Dani Felicitation Volume*, Ancient Pakistan, Peshawar [Research Bulletin of the Department of Archaeology, University of Peshawar], 1993, Plate XXIX b).

The Gandharan Corinthian Capital (Plate: 21), depicts a bust of a female figure in the middle of the capital. Apart from the usage of acanthus as a funerary motif, in the later period, it was used as a decorative motif and especially considered as the main element for the adornment of Corinthian capitals. The bottom of the capital is full of a row of alternating acanthus leaves and double volutes (architectural motif). In Greek architecture, a similar indication of capitals having fully covered acanthus leaves has been observed. The top on either side of the capital is decorated with two full-blown six-petaled lotus with double corolla. This figured Corinthian capital is displayed in the Swat Museum, and few other capitals are also found with slightly different features.



Plate: 21

Depiction of Figured Corinthian capital, from Swat Museum
(Photograph by the authors, Courtesy Swat Museum).

Plate: 22, is showing a Corinthian capital with a female figure in the middle, holding a lotus bud. The capital is decorated with a natural form of acanthus, no curvy edges. Greeks used acanthus motif abundantly over the columns or pillars of religious buildings, monuments, etc. But, more stylized form and curvy edges of acanthus can be seen in the Roman era. They started drawing or carving acanthus leaves with the blending of large ram's horn curl and volutes. In this capital, natural form acanthus having elongated leaves are used to adorn the capital along with other architectural elements (volute, ram's horn 'curvy edges) and lotus bud.

Most of the examples of Indo-Corinthian capitals found in South Asia are decorated with Hellenistic art dating back to the 1st century. Moreover, the classical style has been adopted in Gandhara art and

applied to the Indo Corinthian capitals as well, in which long leaves of acanthus along the other architectural motifs such as scroll and volute, etc. have been combined. The central figure in most of the Gandhara art capitals is very common, which portrays Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and sometimes some other figure. The center figure is mostly surrounded by some other foliage, usually acanthus, lotus, and rosettes.



Plate: 22

Figured Corinthian capital, from Swat Museum
(Photograph by the authors, Courtesy Swat Museum).

A female goddess with her right hand in *abhayamudra*³⁸ appears amongst the acanthus foliage (Plate 23). This representation, like the preceding ones (plates 21 and 22) symbolizes reassurance and protection.

There is another similar example found in Swat Museum, (Plate: 24) with a unique zoomorphic representation. There are two horses in the middle of the Corinthian capital, whereas the lower part is fully covered with a natural form of acanthus leaf, having broad leaves and slightly curving edges. Two acanthus motifs can be seen over the edge of the capital. The representation of the horses is similar to the representation of any figure in previous plates: (21, 22). It may seem that the depiction of the horse is symbolic, as in Buddhism horse symbolizes beauty, speed, fertility and it is also a sign of life in motion.³⁹ “It also symbolizes instinct that to some extent all the events lie within the human consciousness”.⁴⁰ The depiction of acanthus is purely decorative. As it was a trend by Greeks and Romans that they depict the figures, portray of gods, goddesses, royal figures, etc. with the heavy foliage. The acanthus

is used as a decorative motif along with lotus depiction at the top of the capital on either side.



Plate: 23.

Figured Corinthian capital, from Swat Museum,
(Photograph by the authors, Courtesy Swat Museum).



Plate: 24

Zoomorphic Corinthian capital, from Swat Museum
(Photograph by the authors, Courtesy Swat Museum).

A “Meditating Buddha” (Plate: 25) sitting on a throne is shown fully covered with the acanthus leaves all around, sitting under the umbrella of Acanthus leaves. The depiction of inverted and dropping leaf acanthus is used in this panel as a symbolic representation. Acanthus here symbolizes the protection of Buddha, covering him from any evil creature. The umbrella of any foliage in Buddhism as well as in other religions signifies protection.

**Plate: 25**

Panel showing seated Buddha, Grey Schist, Provenance unknown, (Zwalf. W, A Catalog of the Gandhara Sculpture in the British Museum, London [The British Museum Press], 1996, Fig. 460)

**Plate: 26**

Panel showing blown acanthus from Peshawar Museum
(Photograph by the authors, Courtesy Peshawar Museum).

In the early era, acanthus sometimes appeared in the shape of the palmette. A relief panel (Plate:26) depicts an elongated acanthus in palmette shape. The curvy dropped leaves of acanthus can also be observed. In Egyptian art, palmette along with rosette was used for funerary art, but here in Gandhara art, it is used as a decorative motif.

Acanthus depiction in Architectural elements:

Gandhara art is the amalgamation of different world arts mixed with the local workshops. Most of the motifs in Gandhara art are foreign-influenced and their origins can be dated back to the ancient world arts, such as acanthus, lotus, rosettes, etc. Several types of acanthus have been used in Gandharan art, in most of the examples multiple acanthus leaves are used for adornment or symbolism. Plate 27, is also one of the examples, where diverse types of acanthus leaves are depicted. This element of Greek architecture shows different forms of over-hanging acanthus leaves. These acanthus leaves are keeping a shade to a seated Buddha, right in the middle of the greek architectural element. Greek acanthus has been used to cover the middle which is further followed by an acanthus umbrella at the top. There are two acanthus canopies or umbrellas over the head of Buddha while the rest of the two canopies are beside Buddha. The acanthus canopies are used symbolically to protect Buddha. The natural type of acanthus with long elongated flat leaves are used to decorate the corners of an architectural element mixed with volute (architectural motif). The extended row of wavy acanthus has also been used to enhance the aesthetics of this pillar.



Plate: 27

Greek Corinthian capital (architectural element), Provenance Jamal Garhi, W. 42 cm, (John Boardman, *The world of Ancient Art*, London [Thames & Hudson Ltd], 2006, fig 150).

In Gandhara art, acanthus scroll has also been depicted in relief panels or architectural elements for decorative purposes. Mostly the acanthus scroll was portrayed over the edges or the corner of the panels, as shown in plate 28. The architectural piece is showing a row of

reverse acanthus scroll on the left side, acanthus scroll is used to decorate this piece of architecture. Further geometric decorative motifs have also been used for adornment. Acanthus scroll was mostly used as a decorative motif since the classical era.



Plate: 28

Broken Architectural piece, H. 31.8 cm, w. 20.4 cm,
(Zwalf. W, A Catalog of the Gandhara Sculpture in the British
Museum, London [The British Museum Press], 1996, Fig 491).

The protective shield or an umbrella of lotus, acanthus, and other plants was used abundantly in Gandhara art. This symbolizes the protection of Buddha, prince, princess, god, goddesses, deities, or any other divine creature from evil creatures. Plate 29, is a stupa peg showing a female bejeweled, probably a princess or a goddess holding a lotus bud in her hands. Extended acanthus leaves are shown at the back of the figure, symbolizing protection. The figure is surrounded by wavy acanthus on either side.

The relief showing a seated Buddha in a chapel (Plate: 30) is divided into two parts, the uppermost part of the dome is decorated with carinated petals while there is a next layer in the same part, covered with alternative acanthus leaves pointing upward and downwards, making a crowned shape. The lower part of the chapel is standing on a rosette framed base. Several motifs are used in this relief, but except for lotus throne (three rows of centrally grooved petals), the rest are illustrated as decorative motifs.



Plate: 29

Architectural element showing stupa peg or nagadanta, Provenance Dharmarajika, Taxila, Dark Gray Schist, H. 34 cm, w. 8.6 cm, (Khan. M. Bahadur, A Catalogue of the Gandhara Stone Sculptures in the Taxila Museum, Peshawar [Department of Archaeology and Museums], 1994, Fig. 244).

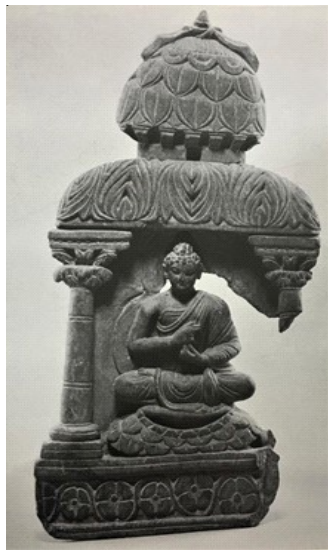


Plate: 30

Relief image showing seated Buddha, Provenance Peshawar, Grey Schist, H. 42.2 cm, w. 20 cm, ((Zwalf. W, A Catalog of the Gandhara Sculpture in the British Museum, London [The British Museum Press], 1996, Fig 110).

Conclusion

In world arts, the most prominent motifs are being copied either from nature or stylized. Acanthus is a classical natural motif, which is a

popular and significant motif, frequently used in three major religions of the world: Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Acanthus is frequently used in art and architecture since remote times until the present with transformation. As the acanthus emerged from on a basket over the grave, it symbolizes immortality and resurrection.

Acanthus motif is one of the popular decorative motif amongst Mediterranean areas and South Asia. And its continuity can be traced from its origin to the modern era in these regions, which also highlights its importance and popularity. It has been extensively used in the past till present in the religious buildings, temples, churches, and mosques over the pillars, pilasters representing as an ornamental motif than symbolic in these regions.

It is the most common architectural motif, employed to decorate the Corinthian capitals. The depiction of acanthus in the western arts predominantly has symbolic implications. Later, it also became part of Buddhist art in South Asia evolving into an intricate design.

Gandhara art is a Buddhist religious art, and most of its motifs are foreign importations. Acanthus motif is also one of the motifs borrowed from Greek and Roman arts, further modified by the local artisans of the region.

The decorative representation of acanthus is more common than symbolic. It is used widely over the registers (upper and lower part), capitals of the Corinthians, throne, over the separate columns, and upper part of the buildings (as an architectural element) as a decorative motif in Gandhara art.

The acanthus representation in Gandharan art is both decorative and symbolic. In some cases, it appears as an ornamental motif adorning the reliefs either enframing them on the upper or lower registers carved delicately to enhance the beauty or on the Corinthian pilasters. Besides, they sometimes represent symbolic connotations too. When depicted with the images of Buddha or other figures, acanthus gives the impression of assurance and protection.

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28. Anthropomorphic: the representation of animals, gods and objects in human form.
29. M.B. Khan, 41.
30. Varia Collection: This collection includes different variety of materials, collected from different sites of Swat Valley, few of them were purchased from Peshawar

and Dir. This collection name Varia because of different origins and provenance it was named as 'Varia Collection'.

31. Dhayana Mudra: Mudra (symbolic hand gesture) of meditation of on the concentration of the good law and of the attainment of the spiritual perfection.
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