Sleep and dreams have long been intertwined with the sacred, and art has served as a conduit to elaborate the stories that are part of many faiths, including Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and others.

The Gandhara region of Pakistan is renowned for cultivating its own unique style of Buddhist art, especially over the Kushan period, which ranged from 100 BCE to 700 CE. The Kushans sat at a crossroads of trade and culture and drew upon a variety of influences to comprise their distinct sculptural schools, with Gandharan art combining Hellenistic elements with Indian motifs and styles, forming the basis of Buddhist art and iconography. In this piece, this is evident in the curled hairstyles (reminiscent of Roman and Greek busts/imagery) and Mediterranean-inspired robe-like clothing, juxtaposed by Indian jewelry adornments pictured around an ornately carved bed.

This piece is a part of a narrative series of schist relief sculptures that retell the myth of “The Dream of Queen Maya.” Schist rock is made of thin layers or bands of minerals that can be split apart easily, allowing sculptors to carve complex details and textures into the rock. According to Buddhist legend, the Queen dreams of being lifted by four celestial beings and taken to the Himalayan mountains, where they bathed her and anointed her in perfumes and rich flowers. Then, a white elephant—a symbol of royalty and greatness—with a white lotus flower in its trunk approached her and entered her womb through her right side. Upon waking from the dream and consulting with her husband, King Suddhodhna, their royal advisors conclude that this dream signified a great divine event. Hence, when Queen Maya subsequently fell pregnant, after having no progeny with King Suddhodhna for 20 years, the birth was perceived as miraculous and, more importantly, abstracted from the sexual act as an instance of immaculate, divine conception. Thus was the story of the birth of the Buddha.

The detailed descriptions of this narrative-styled, yet inexplicable dream indicate the story-like characteristics of REM sleep dreams, with numerous temporal, spatial and logical distortions—qualities of REM dreams that many often experience. Moreover, the notion of dream interpretation from Queen Maya’s royal court parallels similar Roman treatments of dreams needing to be interpreted by Oracles and designated individuals. Hence the dream state itself is seen as retaining symbolic significance and needing educated interpretation, with notions of symbolism behind the white elephant signifying greatness and the white lotus signifying auspiciousness. This ancient view is echoed in Carl Jung’s archetypes, positing that certain universal dream archetypes present themselves across cultures and hold significant insights regarding the inner workings of the dreamer’s psyche. Hence across time, there appears to be an intrinsic tendency to derive and search for symbolic significance in otherwise nonsensical dream visions; humankind continues to elevate the importance of dreams and pore over them to search for inner understanding.

The notion of immaculate conception itself embodies innocence and purity—a true miracle of birth being conceived without a sexual act. This motif is evident across cultures, the birth of the Buddha resembling that of Jesus Christ. Queen Maya and Mary are personifications of pure, maternal love—symbols of divine, holy, and un-touchable power. The role of sleep in propagating the purity of Queen Maya’s birth further illustrates the connection between the sleep state and innocence, a symbolic connotation that is frequently depicted in artworks across time and cultures.

It is important to contextualize this mythological imagery within the significance of sleep and the dream state to Buddhism and its philosophies. Some of the core principles of Buddhist ideology center around “liberation from the things that bind consciousness to illusory concepts of oneself.” Buddhism views opinions and emotions as illusions that provoke our responses to worldly stimuli: the
human experience of life is illusory by nature, and requires that we untangle our fundamental self from the many influences it which it is enmeshed. By this belief, dreams themselves are not so separate from the lived experience; rather, they depict the same illusions of our everyday lives reflecting the same fears and desires that occupy our minds while awake. This spiritual view of the dream state resembles aspects of both Jungian archetype theory and Freudian psychoanalysis. It centers on the belief that dream content is fundamentally influenced by our waking experiences, intricately bound with and indicative of one’s own processing of the illusory world.

Hence, immortalized in schist and carved using time-honed artistic traditions is a reflection of the persistent human fascination with the sleep state and its mysticism.

Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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Recommended Readings

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