The Sri Pratap Singh Museum in Srinagar, Kashmir

By Tara Dhar Hasnain

On a recent visit to first millennium Buddhist and Hindu temple remains in Srinagar, Kashmir, I noted that the temple statuary was missing and wondered where it could be, but no-one seemed to know. I eventually arranged a meeting with Professor Hassnain, former director of the Jammu and Kashmir State Archives. He told me that the statues not in Western museums or private collections could still be seen in the Sri Pratap Singh Museum. The riches I found there left me dumbfounded. Six months later I returned, with permission to take photos in the archaeological section.

This museum has a number of galleries; the most stunning are those housing ancient statuary, sculptures and tiles, carpets and textiles, including many of Kashmir's famous shawls.

The archaeological section has the oldest exhibits, including 2,000-year-old terracotta tiles and fourth century heads from Ushkar (near present-day Baramulla Town in the Kashmir Valley) which reveal both Greek and Gandharan style and influence in the eyes, the curling hair and many other details.

Bronze frame detail with Vishnu incarnations, end of first millennium

A number of major sites – Ushkar, Harwan, Pandenthran, Avantipura, Parihaspura and to a lesser extent, Martand and Mattan – have yielded numerous first millennium finds. A very famous piece, from the end of the first millennium, is a bronze frame, like a picture frame, with detailed carvings all around, depicting various incarnations of Vishnu. The central image is missing and many believe it was an image of the Buddha. This frame is one of the most intricately carved bronze pieces of that period from the Indian sub-continent, testimony to Kashmiri artists' ability to execute such pieces in metal.

There are two large, seventh century stone Buddhas from Parihaspura, which also had a temple dedicated to Hindu gods. The standing Buddha wears a crown tied with ribbons, seen at the sides – a detail more in common with China or Central Asia than with Buddha statues found in India. The seated Buddha is enclosed in a trefoil arch, a common feature of religious architecture in Kashmir from the seventh to 10th centuries, found at the Hindu temple sites of Martand, the Sun God, as well as at Avantipura, a city established by the ninth century Kashmiri king, Avantivarman. He had two large temples built, one to Vishnu, the other to Shiva, both of which have been excavated.

Another site that has yielded a rich hoard of both Buddhist and Hindu images is Pandenthran – a corruption of the ancient name 'Puranadhisthan'. An eighth century Shiva from there reveals Gandharan influence, particularly in the hair style.

Two ninth century sculptures of Vishnu and of Lakshmi, both from Avantipura, are remarkable in different ways. Besides his three heads, the Vishnu is notable for the dagger by his waist, believed to be a unique feature of Vishnus from Kashmir. The Lakshmi could easily be mistaken for a Greek goddess.

Standing Buddha, Parihaspura

Shiva, eighth century, Pandenthran

Three-headed Vishnu, Avantipura, ninth century

There are many other interesting statues, mostly Buddhist and Hindu, plus other treasure galleries in this museum – miniature paintings, detailed metalwork, Kashmiri carpets, *papier mâché* items such as turban boxes and *kalamdans* (penholders) and rare and beautiful shawls, including a huge Pashmina shawl embroidered with the 'map' of Srinagar. Its twin is on display at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

All photos by the author