

Beyond the Label: Understanding, Perception and Immersion in the Cross-Cultural Curation of Buddhist Images

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Abstract: *The museum display of Buddhist images transforms not only their location but also the interpretive, spatial, and sensory relations through which they acquire meaning. While classification by chronology, geography, material, and iconography makes Buddhist art accessible to wider audiences, it can also detach images from ritual practice, architecture, bodily movement, and collective memory. This article examines this tension through three modes of curatorial mediation: understanding, perception, and immersion. Drawing on museum theory, object biography, phenomenology, cultural translation, and the experience economy, it considers how textual interpretation, spatial encounter, and digital reconstruction reshape the relationship between object and viewer. Examples from World Museum Liverpool, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Digital Dunhuang show that immersive technologies can restore certain lost relations while also producing new forms of abstraction and spectacle. The essay therefore proposes a shift from object-centred display toward relational curation, developed through the concepts of interpretive distance, critical immersion, and the Relational Curatorial Loop.*

Keywords: *Buddhist art; cross-cultural curation; museum studies; cultural translation; embodiment; immersive exhibition; digital heritage; sculpture*

1. Introduction

The problem becomes most visible when a Buddhist image enters the museum. Although the object may remain materially unchanged, the conditions through which it is encountered are fundamentally different. A sculpture once positioned within a temple, cave, monastery, or devotional shrine is relocated into a gallery where it can be classified, compared, conserved, and interpreted within a historical framework. A Buddha image that once formed part of a larger architectural and ritual ensemble may consequently be encountered as an independent sculpture, an example of a regional style, or evidence of a particular historical period. Museum display therefore expands accessibility while simultaneously reorganizing the relationships through which the object becomes meaningful.

Museum studies has long challenged the assumption that such transformations are neutral. Hooper-Greenhill [1] argues that museums actively shape knowledge through classification and display, while Bennett [2] situates exhibition within broader systems of institutional authority and public pedagogy. This problem becomes especially significant in cross-cultural exhibitions, where museums mediate between culturally specific systems of meaning and visitors who may have little prior knowledge of Buddhist doctrine, ritual, or visual language. Textual interpretation is therefore necessary, yet it can also create distance. Visitors may learn when an image was made and what its iconography signifies while remaining unaware of how bodily movement, architectural hierarchy, sound, light, and devotional practice once structured its significance. As Morgan [3] suggests, religious images operate not only through representation but also through embodied and sensory practices.

In response, museums have increasingly adopted spatial reconstruction, digital imaging, virtual reality, and immersive environments. These strategies can reconnect objects with relations that conventional galleries often suppress, but they also risk replacing historical complexity with sensory spectacle. The Mogao Caves at Dunhuang make this tension particularly visible, since sculpture, mural painting, architecture, and spatial sequence are closely integrated. This article therefore asks how cross-cultural exhibitions of Buddhist images can move beyond both textual decontextualization and technological spectacle. It examines three modes of curatorial mediation “understanding, perception, and immersion”—and argues for a shift from object-centred display toward “relational curation”, in which the museum seeks not to recreate an original sacred environment, but to make historically transformed

relationships among image, body, space, and culture perceptible again.

2. Theoretical Framework: From Object to Relation

The theoretical premise of this article is that museum objects do not carry fixed meanings independently of the conditions in which they are displayed. Museums actively produce interpretive structures through classification, selection, juxtaposition, and spatial arrangement. Hooper-Greenhill has demonstrated that museum knowledge is historically constructed rather than merely transmitted, while Bennett [2] situates exhibition within broader institutional systems that organize objects for public visibility. These arguments are particularly relevant to Buddhist images, since their relocation into museums often entails a shift from religious participation toward historical, aesthetic, and educational interpretation. A sculpture may remain materially unchanged, yet the categories through which it is presented can alter what viewers are encouraged to notice and what kinds of meaning become legible. This transformation should not be understood simply as a movement from an “authentic” sacred context into an artificial museum environment. Kopytoff’s [4] notion of the “cultural biography of things” offers a more useful model, emphasizing that objects acquire different identities as they move through changing social and institutional settings.

A Buddhist sculpture may therefore pass through several regimes of meaning. It may begin as a devotional image, later become a damaged or displaced religious object, enter an archaeological or private collection, and eventually be classified as museum heritage or digitized as a virtual asset. Each stage does not erase what came before, but neither does it leave previous meanings intact. The museum is one moment within this longer biography of reinterpretation, consistent with a broader account of objects as acquiring changing social lives across contexts [5]. What changes most significantly is the network of relations surrounding the object: who may approach it, what kind of attention it receives, how its value is defined, and which aspects of its past are made visible.

Material-religion scholarship helps clarify what can be lost when these relations are narrowed. Morgan argues that religious images operate not only through representation but through embodied practices of seeing, touching, remembering, and inhabiting space.

This emphasis on embodiment is especially important for sculpture. Merleau-Ponty’s [6] phenomenology locates perception in the body’s relation to space rather than in detached visual observation. For exhibition practice, this means that scale, distance, orientation, movement, and light participate directly in interpretation. A monumental Buddha viewed from below creates a different bodily relation from the same figure placed at eye level; a sculpture encountered through movement produces a different experience from one presented frontally and statically. These spatial conditions are not merely matters of display design. They influence how meaning is produced.

Cross-cultural exhibition adds another layer to this process. Bhabha’s [7] concept of cultural translation is useful because it rejects the assumption that meaning passes unchanged from one culture to another. Translation instead involves negotiation, displacement, and reformulation. Buddhist art is particularly suited to this framework because its visual forms were themselves transformed as Buddhism moved across South Asia, Central Asia, China, and other regions. Contemporary museums therefore undertake a second act of translation: objects already shaped by earlier intercultural exchanges are interpreted again for audiences situated within different historical and cultural frameworks.

Taken together, these perspectives shift attention away from the object as an isolated bearer of meaning and toward the relations through which meaning is continually produced. This provides the theoretical basis for the later distinction between understanding, perception, and immersion.

3. Buddhist Images before the Museum: Transcultural Formation and Visual Translation

Any discussion of cross-cultural curation must first question the assumption that Buddhist images emerged within culturally homogeneous environments and were only later displaced by museums. Buddhist visual culture was already shaped by movement long before the rise of the modern museum. As Buddhism travelled through South Asia, Gandhara, Central Asia, China, Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia, religious ideas circulated together with artistic techniques, materials, workshop practices, and systems of patronage. These movements did not produce identical visual forms across regions. Rather, Buddhist images were repeatedly adjusted to different political environments, aesthetic conventions, ritual needs, and local concepts of sacred presence. The history of Buddhist art is therefore better

understood not as the diffusion of a stable visual language from a single centre, but as a sequence of translations in which forms were continually reinterpreted. What travelled was not simply reproduced; it was reformulated through new cultural conditions.

Gandharan sculpture provides one of the clearest examples. Its significance lies not merely in the presence of Hellenistic or Roman stylistic features, but in the way these visual resources were reorganized within a Buddhist framework. Drapery, bodily naturalism, architectural motifs, and narrative conventions acquired new functions once they entered Buddhist devotional and iconographic systems.

This is why the language of “influence” is often insufficient. It can imply a one-directional process in which one culture provides forms and another passively receives them. Cultural translation is more complex, involving selection, adaptation, combination, and rejection. Bhabha’s [7] concept of cultural translation is useful here because it treats meaning as something produced through negotiation rather than transferred intact between fixed cultural identities [7]. Buddhist art offers a particularly strong case because the translation of religious ideas often required the reformulation of visual form itself. The development of anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha, for example, involved more than a shift from symbolic to figural imagery. Once the Buddha was represented through a human body, that body had to be culturally articulated. Proportion, drapery, facial expression, gesture, stillness, and degrees of idealization all became sites of interpretation. What emerged was not a single universal Buddhist body, but a range of sacred bodies shaped by different visual traditions. The movement of Buddhism into China extended this process further, as imported iconographies were gradually reformulated through local approaches to line, physiognomy, material, architectural setting, court patronage, and workshop practice. Such changes were not simply stylistic; they reflected broader negotiations between religious concepts and local systems of representation.

For this reason, Buddhist art should not be approached only as a sequence of self-contained national traditions. The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s “Buddhism Along the Silk Road: 5th–8th Century” [8] is instructive because it framed Buddhist production through circulation rather than isolation. By bringing together works from India, Gandhara, Afghanistan, and Central Asia within networks of trade, pilgrimage, and religious exchange, the exhibition shifted attention from where an object “belongs” to the routes and encounters through which it emerged. Geographical categories such as India, China, or Japan remain useful for orientation, but they can also obscure the degree to which regional traditions were themselves constituted through sustained interaction. A transcultural approach therefore does more than add connections between already stable cultures; it treats connection as one of the historical conditions through which those cultures became visually distinct.

This has direct implications for museum practice. If Buddhist art was already formed through translation, the curator cannot simply recover a single uncontested original meaning. Kopytoff’s [4] notion of the “cultural biography of things” helps explain why such objects should be understood as moving through successive regimes of meaning rather than possessing one stable identity. The historical movement of Buddhist art may therefore be understood as “first-order cultural translation”, while the museum performs a “second-order cultural translation”, reinterpreting already translated objects for contemporary audiences. Cross-cultural curation, in this sense, is not simply the explanation of one culture to another, but the task of making visible the histories of translation already embedded within the object itself.

4. Understanding: Textual Interpretation and the Paradox of Interpretive Distance

The museum’s first response to cultural unfamiliarity is usually interpretive. Objects are named, dated, classified, and positioned within chronological, geographical, or stylistic sequences so that visitors can understand what they are seeing. In the case of Buddhist art, this process is particularly important because much of its visual language is not immediately legible to audiences without prior knowledge of Buddhist doctrine, ritual, or iconography. The distinction between a Buddha and a bodhisattva, the significance of a mudra, the attributes of a particular deity, or the symbolic function of a stupa cannot always be inferred through form alone. Labels, maps, timelines, diagrams, audio guides, and comparative displays therefore perform an essential mediating role. They translate specialist knowledge into a public language and give visitors the conceptual structure necessary to approach unfamiliar objects. Yet interpretation is never merely supplementary. It also directs attention. A label that emphasizes dynasty, material, and stylistic development encourage the visitor to read the sculpture primarily through art history; one centred on ritual practice produces a different interpretive frame; another concerned with provenance may reposition the same object within histories of excavation, collecting, displacement, or colonial circulation. The

museum does not simply supply information about an object that already possesses a complete and self-evident meaning. Through selection, description, and classification, it participates in deciding which aspects of the object become most visible. This is especially consequential in cross-cultural exhibitions, where the institutional voice of the museum often becomes the principal mediator between the object and visitors who lack a shared cultural vocabulary.

The difficulty begins when explanation is expected to compensate for relationships that no longer exist within the gallery.

A Buddhist sculpture may be accompanied by precise information about its date, place of production, religious identity, stylistic characteristics, and original function, while the conditions through which that function became meaningful remain largely abstract. A wall text may state that a figure once occupied an elevated altar, yet the sculpture is presented at eye level. It may describe circumambulation while the object itself is placed against a wall. It may refer to chanting, incense, ritual procession, offerings, restricted visibility, or collective worship while the gallery remains acoustically neutral, visually open, and structured around the movement of individual spectators. Nothing in the text is necessarily inaccurate. The problem lies elsewhere: the exhibition separates propositional knowledge from the spatial and bodily relations that once gave such knowledge experiential force. This gap is what this article terms “interpretive distance”. Interpretive distance arises when the museum succeeds in making an object cognitively legible while the conditions of its historical experience become increasingly remote. The visitor may learn what an object is, when it was produced, and what its iconography signifies without developing a comparable understanding of how it operated within a particular environment. In cross-cultural settings, this distance can become more pronounced because cultural unfamiliarity produces an understandable pressure toward greater explanation. The less the audience is expected to know, the more the museum feels obliged to clarify. Yet explanation can gradually come to dominate the encounter. The visitor reads before looking, identifies before attending, and confirms what the label has already established before moving on. In such cases, the material object risks becoming evidence for a discourse that precedes it. This is not simply a question of visitor attention span. It is a structural consequence of a model in which knowledge is assumed to be transferable primarily through verbal explanation. Hooper-Greenhill’s account of museums as institutions that shape rather than merely transmit knowledge is important here [1]. A museum label condenses uncertainty, scholarly disagreement, cultural variation, and historical change into a limited and authoritative form. Such compression is unavoidable, but it can produce an illusion of stability. Buddhist images are especially resistant to this tendency because their meanings often exceed a single interpretive register. The same sculpture may have functioned as an iconographic representation, an object of devotion, a material offering, a political commission, a demonstration of artistic skill, a means of generating merit, and a marker of institutional power. Some of these meanings belong to historical contexts; others may remain active for contemporary practitioners. To identify the sculpture only as an artwork, a religious object, or an archaeological specimen is therefore not simply to choose a convenient category. It is to privilege one history of the object over others.

A more useful distinction is between “information about the object” and “information about relationships”. The former answers questions of date, provenance, material, authorship, and iconography. The latter asks how an object was approached, where it was positioned, how it related to surrounding images, who was permitted to see it, what forms of movement or attention it required, and how its significance changed across different communities and periods. The distinction is not intended to oppose factual knowledge to experience. Rather, it shifts context from the status of background information to that of an active component of meaning. The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s “Tree & Serpent: Early Buddhist Art in India, 200 BCE–400 CE” [9] offers a useful example of such an expanded interpretive frame. Individual sculptures were presented in relation to stupas, relics, sacred sites, devotional practices, patronage, and narrative environments, allowing early Buddhist art to be encountered not only as a sequence of formal developments but as part of a broader religious system. Such an approach complicates the conventional division between object and context. In many Buddhist environments, context was not simply something surrounding an autonomous work. Architectural placement, ritual sequence, bodily movement, adjacent images, and modes of access were constitutive of the object’s function itself.

The limits of textual interpretation therefore become most visible when context is described but cannot be sensed. Once that limit is acknowledged, the problem of understanding necessarily opens onto a problem of perception: not only what the museum tells the visitor about a Buddhist image, but what the exhibition space allows the visitor to experience in relation to it.

5. Perception: Sculpture, Embodiment, and Spatial Translation

If textual interpretation makes Buddhist images intellectually legible, perception concerns the conditions under which they become physically and spatially present. This distinction is especially important for sculpture, which is never encountered as image alone. Scale, volume, weight, orientation, surface, and distance all shape the relation between object and viewer. A monumental Buddha positioned above eye level produces a bodily asymmetry that cannot be reduced to iconographic description, while a small gilt-bronze figure creates a different sense of intimacy through proximity and scale. Merleau-Ponty's [5] phenomenology is useful here because it rejects the idea of perception as detached visual reception. The body is not simply located in space; it is through the body that space becomes meaningful [5]. In museum display, height, distance, approach, movement, and visual access are therefore not secondary design decisions. They participate directly in interpretation.

This bodily dimension is particularly significant in Buddhist visual culture, where viewing has often been structured through movement: circumambulation, frontal approach, kneeling, looking upward, or passing through a sequence of thresholds. These actions organize attention rather than merely facilitate circulation.

The modern gallery frequently replaces such historically specific relations with a more standardized choreography of viewing. Duncan's [10] account of the museum as a ritualized space is useful in this respect. Although museums are secular institutions, they still regulate movement, attention, distance, and behavior through architecture and convention. The isolated plinth, controlled viewing distance, even lighting, and silent gallery encourage the visitor to treat the object as an autonomous work available for visual inspection. For Buddhist sculpture, however, this apparent neutrality can be misleading. A figure originally embedded in an altar ensemble, cave wall, architectural niche, or processional route may have depended upon relationships that disappear when it is presented as self-contained form. The relocation of a Buddhist image therefore does not remove it from spatial choreography altogether; one choreography is replaced by another.

A more productive response is what may be called "spatial translation". This does not mean rebuilding temples or caves as theatrical replicas. Rather, it identifies historically significant spatial relations and rearticulates them within the museum. Circumambulation may be suggested by allowing movement around a sculpture; hierarchy can be communicated through elevation and distance; changes in light or thresholds can slow the visitor and alter the rhythm of attention. Architectural models, partial reconstructions, or projected images can restore relations among sculpture, built environment, and narrative without claiming to reproduce an original setting in full. The aim is not to reconstruct a temple as an object, but to translate some of the conditions through which an image once became perceptually meaningful.

The Buddhism galleries at World Museum Liverpool provide a useful example. Tythacott [11] notes that reconstructed shrine and altar environments were used to place Buddhist objects within spatial settings different from conventional isolated display. Their value lies not in reproducing an "authentic" Buddhist environment, but in acknowledging that religious objects were historically embedded in specific spatial arrangements. At the same time, such reconstruction requires restraint. A museum-built shrine can itself become an aesthetic spectacle, encouraging visitors to treat Buddhism as a generalized atmosphere rather than a historically differentiated tradition. Spatial translation should therefore make relationships perceptible without creating the illusion of direct access to another culture.

This approach also leaves room for aesthetic experience. Buddhist sculpture should not cease to be encountered as art simply because aesthetic display can be reductive. Surface, proportion, material, carving, casting, and color remain historically meaningful, and for many visitors aesthetic response may provide the first point of entry into an unfamiliar tradition. The curatorial question is whether that response remains an endpoint or opens toward questions of ritual use, workshop practice, patronage, and cultural exchange. Perception, in this sense, does not replace understanding; it reconnects knowledge with the body and prepares the ground for immersive forms of mediation that can extend spatial translation beyond the physical gallery.

6. Immersion: Digital Reconstruction and the Limits of Experience

Immersive exhibition is often presented as a response to the limitations of conventional museum display. Digital projection, virtual reality, augmented reality, spatial audio, and three-dimensional reconstruction can reconnect objects with visual and environmental relations that are difficult to convey

through isolated display or text alone. This is particularly relevant to Buddhist heritage sites in which architecture, painting, sculpture, and spatial sequence operate together. The Mogao Caves at Dunhuang provide a clear example: their significance cannot be reduced to individual murals or sculptures without altering the visual system in which those elements were originally embedded. Projects such as Sarah Kenderdine's "Pure Land: Inside the Mogao Grottoes at Dunhuang" [12] use high-resolution imaging and three-dimensional modelling to reconstruct Cave 220 as an interactive environment, allowing visitors to perceive relations among image, architecture, and site that conventional display can only describe. In this sense, immersion is most valuable not because it produces a more spectacular image of the past, but because it can restore a degree of relational coherence to material that museums often encounter in fragmented form.

Yet the idea of "restoring context" is itself problematic. Digital environments are not transparent windows onto the past; they are interpretive constructions. Every reconstruction involves decisions about viewpoint, colour, scale, sound, sequence, movement, and historical period. A digitally restored mural may appear more complete than the surviving surface, while a virtual cave can present a coherent visual world assembled from archaeological evidence, conservation data, and contemporary design. The more seamless the reconstruction becomes, the easier it is for interpretation to acquire the appearance of fact. This issue is especially important in cross-cultural exhibitions, where visitors may lack the background knowledge needed to distinguish surviving material from reconstructed or speculative elements.

The problem becomes more complex when immersive heritage is situated within the contemporary experience economy. Pine and Gilmore [13] describe a broader shift in which cultural and economic value increasingly depend on memorable staged experiences. Museums now operate within similar pressures of tourism, sponsorship, digital circulation, visitor numbers, and public visibility. Immersive exhibitions are particularly compatible with this environment because they produce experiences that are visually immediate, emotionally accessible, and easily shared. Commercial success is not inherently incompatible with scholarship, and digital projects can support conservation, education, and wider access. The difficulty arises when sensory intensity becomes the main criterion of interpretation. Buddhist heritage is especially vulnerable to this reduction because it already circulates through globally recognizable signs of serenity, meditation, mandalas, lotus imagery, monumental figures, and generalized notions of "Eastern spirituality." When detached from specific histories and practices, such imagery may create a convincing Buddhist atmosphere while offering little understanding of the communities, doctrines, or political conditions from which it emerged. Decontextualization therefore does not disappear; it changes form. The conventional museum may reduce the Buddhist image to information, while immersive display risks reducing it to sensation.

For this reason, this article proposes the term "critical immersion". Critical immersion combines sensory engagement with explicit awareness of mediation. It does not seek to make the museum disappear behind an illusion of historical presence. Instead, it allows visitors to recognize what has been reconstructed, what remains uncertain, and which elements derive from surviving evidence. Digital additions can be distinguished from original material, speculative reconstruction can be identified, and different historical phases can be presented without collapsing them into a single idealized image. Curatorial transparency is especially important because immersive realism carries a powerful authority: written interpretation is usually recognized as interpretation, whereas a fully rendered digital environment may be experienced as if the past had simply been restored.

The strongest use of immersion may therefore be one that redirects attention back to the material object. A virtual cave or reconstructed ensemble can provide a spatial framework through which a surviving fragment becomes newly intelligible. Immersion should not replace the object or claim to recover historical experience in full; its value lies in changing the encounter that follows. Its critical potential emerges from maintaining a productive tension between presence and distance, making lost relations perceptible while preserving an awareness that the past remains partial, mediated, and open to interpretation.

7. From Immersion to Relational Curation

Neither textual interpretation nor immersive experience is sufficient on its own. Text can make unfamiliar objects legible while leaving spatial and sensory relations abstract; immersion can create presence while concealing the interpretive choices through which that presence is produced. The issue, therefore, is not whether museums should choose between conventional and immersive display, but how they understand the object itself. If the Buddhist image is treated as an autonomous work to which context

is subsequently added, both text and technology remain supplementary. A relational approach begins instead from the assumption that meaning is constituted through connections with ritual, architecture, material, movement, patronage, political authority, collecting, and later forms of display. This article refers to such an approach as “relational curation”: not the restoration of a complete historical environment, but the selective recovery of relations obscured through museumization.

This shift also changes the meaning of cross-cultural interpretation. The museum is no longer simply a channel transferring stable meanings from one culture to another. Buddhist objects have already passed through processes of translation, while contemporary audiences approach them from different cultural, religious, and aesthetic positions. Bhabha’s account of cultural translation is useful here because it replaces straightforward transmission with negotiation. A practitioner, an art historian, a sculptor, or a visitor unfamiliar with Buddhism may encounter the same object differently. Relational curation does not need to collapse these perspectives into a single authoritative reading; it can instead make their coexistence visible.

Aesthetic experience remains important within this model. Buddhist sculpture does not cease to be visually compelling because it has religious significance. For many visitors, material, surface, scale, drapery, or bodily stillness may provide the first point of engagement. The curatorial question is whether aesthetic response remains an endpoint or opens toward questions of ritual use, workshop practice, patronage, circulation, and cultural exchange. Relational curation therefore does not reject the artistic status of the Buddhist image; it refuses to treat that status as sufficient.

The problem becomes more complex within the contemporary experience economy. Museums increasingly operate through tourism, sponsorship, cultural branding, ticketing, digital circulation, and public visibility. Immersive Buddhist exhibitions fit easily within this environment because they generate recognizable and shareable experiences. Commercial activity is not inherently opposed to cultural interpretation and may support conservation, research, digitization, and wider access. The difficulty arises when visibility begins to determine which aspects of culture are represented. Monumental figures, mandalas, lotus imagery, meditative sound, and luminous colour circulate easily, while doctrinal difference, historical conflict, institutional history, and ritual restriction are less immediately marketable. Dunhuang, for example, may be presented as a historically layered site of religious practice and Silk Road exchange, or reduced to flying apsaras, colour, animation, and spectacle. The issue is not commerce itself, but whether commercial value begins to reorganize all other forms of value.

Curatorial success should therefore be measured not simply by information, immersion, or visitor numbers, but by whether an exhibition expands the relations through which an object can be understood. Relational curation provides a framework in which understanding, perception, and immersion can operate together without anyone becoming the final measure of cultural experience.

8. The Relational Curatorial Loop

The progression from understanding to perception and immersion should not be interpreted as a linear sequence in which one mode supersedes the previous one. Such a model would reproduce the technological determinism that often accompanies discussions of digital exhibition. Text does not become obsolete once spatial design is introduced, nor does spatial experience lose its value when immersive media become available. Each mode reveals different aspects of the object and each has different limitations. The problem is therefore not how to move beyond one mode toward another, but how to organize movement among them. For this reason, the model proposed here is cyclical rather than progressive. It can be expressed as: “Object → Understanding → Perception → Immersion → Reflection → Object”. The value of this sequence lies in the return. The visitor does not move away from the material object toward an increasingly mediated experience; instead, mediation becomes meaningful insofar as it changes how the object is encountered when the visitor comes back to it.

The first encounter may be immediate and partial. A visitor may respond to scale, material, facial expression, colour, or an unfamiliar gesture before possessing any historical knowledge. Interpretation then provides orientation, while spatial and bodily experience allow the object to be understood through more than iconographic identification. Immersive or digital mediation can extend this process by reconnecting the object to environments, narrative structures, architectural relations, or historical states that are no longer physically accessible. Reflection, however, is necessary before the cycle is complete. Without it, immersive reconstruction risks becoming an endpoint. Reflection introduces critical distance by asking how the object has been classified, what has been reconstructed, which relations have been emphasized, and which remain absent.

The second encounter with the object is therefore qualitatively different from the first. A fragment may begin to suggest the architectural ensemble from which it was removed; traces of pigment can be understood in relation to an earlier chromatic environment; a gesture may become legible through ritual practice rather than formal description alone. In Gandharan sculpture, for instance, drapery may no longer appear simply as evidence of classical influence but as part of a longer history of visual translation. In a Dunhuang context, a detached image may be understood not only as an individual work but as one component within a larger iconographic and spatial system. The object has not changed, but the field of relations through which it is perceived has expanded.

This cyclical model also resists the tendency to treat digital experience as the culmination of museum interpretation. Immersion is placed in the middle of the loop rather than at its end. Its function is transitional: it enables relations to become perceptible and then returns attention to the material, historical, and institutional status of the object. This is particularly important in cross-cultural exhibition, where highly persuasive digital environments may otherwise create the impression that another culture has been fully reconstructed and made available for immediate consumption.

The “Relational Curatorial Loop” therefore proposes a different criterion for curatorial effectiveness. Success is not measured simply by informational clarity, emotional intensity, technological sophistication, or visitor satisfaction. A stronger measure is whether the exhibition changes the visitor’s capacity to recognize complexity. Does the visitor see the object as belonging to more than one historical context? Can artistic form be related to ritual use without one cancelling the other? Can digital reconstruction clarify spatial relations without pretending to recover the past in full? Can the museum make its own role in producing meaning visible?

These questions also return the museum itself to the analysis. The museum should not stand outside the loop as a neutral mediator. Its classifications, architectural decisions, digital interfaces, commercial strategies, and interpretive priorities all become part of the object’s contemporary biography. In this sense, relational curation requires a degree of institutional self-reflexivity. The museum does not simply reveal relations that already exist; it also creates new ones. A Buddhist sculpture placed beside an archaeological fragment, reconstructed cave model, contemporary video, or archival document enters a new field of association generated by the exhibition. The responsibility of curation lies partly in making those new relations intelligible rather than allowing them to appear natural or inevitable.

The loop is therefore not a method for restoring completeness. Its purpose is to sustain movement between object and context, presence and mediation, familiarity and difference. Rather than resolving the cultural distance between visitor and Buddhist image, it gives that distance a structure through which it can be approached critically. The visitor returns to the object not with the sense that it has been fully explained, but with a greater awareness of the histories, absences, translations, and institutional choices that continue to shape what can be seen.

9. Conclusion

The cross-cultural exhibition of Buddhist images reveals a persistent tension between accessibility and decontextualization. Textual interpretation, spatial perception, and immersive technologies can each recover different aspects of meaning, but none is sufficient on its own. Concepts such as “interpretive distance” and “critical immersion” therefore help clarify both the value and the limits of these curatorial approaches.

This article proposes a shift from object-centred display toward “relational curation”, summarized through the “Relational Curatorial Loop: Object → Understanding → Perception → Immersion → Reflection → Object”. Rather than reconstructing a single original context, this model treats the museum as one stage in the continuing cultural biography of the Buddhist image, where historical, spatial, material, and intercultural relations can be made perceptible again.

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