

The Legacy of the Indus Valley Civilization in Indian Classical Sculptures

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Abstract: The Indus Valley and Indian sculptures are known for their wide variety of items, including clay figures, seals, and pottery. This research examines the relationship between the Indus Valley and Indian sculptures with the help of certain specimens, which are made of stone, bronze, and clay. To achieve the research objectives, the case study method has been used for in-depth analysis of the artistic styles and motifs. Comparison has been made on the basis of the forms, techniques, and stylistic details of different sculptures to identify patterns and influences. The results indicated that Indian classical art and Indus sculptures were based on religious subject matter, showing scenes of gods and goddesses, legends, and heavenly figures. These sculptures and artifacts provided invaluable insights into the art, religion, and social life of ancient Indus culture. Moreover, these sculptures served as a cultural link that unites diverse groups across the vast expanse of the civilization, highlighting a shared artistic heritage. Comparative studies have revealed that the Indus Valley sculptures reveal significant continuities in materials and techniques with Indian classical sculptures, highlighting the evolution in stylistic and thematic complexity over time. This research concluded that the Indus Valley artworks laid a foundational artistic tradition that was later transmitted to Indian cultures, integrating new influences and developing in unique regional styles.

Keywords: Sculptures, Terracotta, Artifacts, Indian Classical Art, Deities.

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1. Introduction

The Indus Valley civilization was the earliest significant civilization in South Asia, spanning a wide region of territory in modern-day India and Pakistan, developed between BC 2700 and BC 1900, or over 800 years. Its name came from its location in the Indus River valley, although it is also known as the *Indus-Sarasvati* Civilization and the Harappan Civilization Kenoyer, [1]. The Indus Valley Civilization's roots may be traced back to the pre-Harappan civilizations of Mehrgarh (approximately 7000-2600 BCE), when early agricultural methods and domestication of plants and animals established stable settlements. The advent of planned towns such as Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro demonstrates the shift towards urbanization. The civilization grew in a physically strategic position, with the Indus River providing life-sustaining water for cultivation and trade. The lush plains supported a vibrant agrarian population, and the location near the Arabian Sea encouraged marine trade. The civilization, notable for its outstanding urban planning, intricate drainage systems, sculpture, and distinctive red pottery, was concentrated around significant cities like Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, now located in Pakistan and northwest

India, respectively. Despite its final fall about 1300 BCE, which was most likely caused by environmental reasons or external forces, the Indus valley civilization remains an important period in human history, demonstrating the complexity and durability of ancient communities Wright, [2]. This civilization featured several significant sites in both Pakistan (Harappa, Mohenjodaro, and Amri) and India (Kalibangan, Lothal, Surkotada, Banawali, Chanhudaro, and Dholavira), as shown in the map in Figure 1. The lack of massive structures and decipherable written documents has made it difficult to completely grasp the civilization's socio-political organization and religious rituals. Archaeologists and historians continue to be fascinated by the finding of well-planned cities, complex water management systems, and a variety of artistic artefacts like terracotta figurines and elaborate seals. Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro's artworks have transformed art in several ways, Parpola [3]. The excavations at these sites unearthed a wealth of objects such as seals, pottery, and statues. By analyzing the substances, implements, and design features used, this study seeks to uncover the complexity of their sculpting methods.

1.1 Significance of the Research

The remnants of this remarkable civilization include the design of cities, advanced sewer systems, and intricate trade routes. It is the detailed sculptures, especially the clay figures and seals, that give deep insights into the cultural, religious, and economic aspects of this mysterious community. This investigation is crucial to explore the clay figures from the Indus Valley Civilization, which represent the highest level of artistic expression, showcasing the daily lives, spiritual views, and artistic tastes of its people. These figures, made with remarkable precision and care, show a variety of human and animal forms. People figures, often with elaborate hairstyles, unique clothing, and many adornments, provide a special look into the fashion and social norms of the era. Animal sculptures are also carefully crafted, with images of humped bulls and other animals suggesting a connection to nature and possibly religious meanings. Through examining these ancient pieces, the research seeks to understand the lasting influence of Indus Valley art on the cultural and artistic legacy of the area.

1.2 Research Objectives

- To document the sculptural techniques of the Indus Valley Civilization, focusing on the materials, methods, and cultural significance of terracotta and other sculptural artifacts.
- To analyze the Indus Valley sculptural techniques with Indian classical contemporary art.

1.3 Research Question

1. How did the sculptural techniques and materials used in the Indus Valley Civilization reflect the cultural and religious significance of terracotta and other sculptural artifacts?
2. What are the similarities and differences in the materials and methods used in Indus Valley sculptures and modern Indian classical sculptures?

The research questions explored the relationship between the techniques and materials used in Indus Valley sculpture and their cultural and religious contexts. It encourages an in-depth examination of the methods and materials, such as terracotta and steatite, and their significance in the daily and spiritual lives of the Indus Valley.



Fig.1: Map of Indus Valley Civilization 2600-1900 BCE

(Source: Avantiputra7. (2020, October 06). Indus Valley Civilization - Mature Harappan Phase. *World History Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/12853/indus-valley-civilization---mature-harappan-phase/>)

2. Literature Review

Throughout the years, several researchers have examined the Indus Valley civilization in a historical context. John Marshall was the first to write on the subject of Indus valley excavations in Mohenjo-Daro in the 1920s. According to Marshall [4], the Harappan civilization's art was complex and showed its advanced culture. The sites of the Indus Valley have been examined for the discovery of artifacts. According to Ernest Mackay, an intricate statue carved out of steatite more than four thousand years ago, Priest-King is among the most recognizable artifacts from

the Indus Valley civilization, one of the oldest and largest Bronze Age civilizations in the world Mackay, [5].

According to Possehl, early figurines unearthed from various locations linked to the Indus Valley Civilization illustrate a variety of domesticated, wild, and occasionally mythical creatures. It is believed these figurines were crafted by hand from fine-fired clay or terracotta, blended with sand, shell fragments, mica, and organic materials Possehl, [6]. According to Huntington, the initial Indus figurines, primarily excavated from the Mehrgarh and Nausharo sites in the present-day Balochistan province of Pakistan, date back to around 7000 BCE, which is before the Early Harappan Phase. However, the creation of terracotta figurines reached its peak during the Mature Harappan Phase. Unlike earlier findings, the largest number of figurines from this later period were discovered at the Harappa and Mohenjo-daro sites in the Punjab and Sindh provinces. While there is a general compositional consistency between these representations and those from previous times, the newer figurines display unique characteristics Huntington, [7]. Shereen Ratnagar examined the art and material culture of the Harappan civilization. She documented the characteristics of Harappan art, such as the utilization of terracotta and bronze figures, as well as the depiction of animals and people in their artwork. Her studies highlighted the chronologically or geographically condition of the Indus valley sites, Ratnagar, 2016. Selected sculptures from the Malakand collection hold historical significance and demonstrate a variety of postures and actions. These sculptures reflect the traditions and practices of Buddhism in Gandhara and capture the artistic standards, as well as the essence and spirit of the devotees and creators. The classification of sculptures is based on a detailed and specific analysis of the materials used in crafting the stone sculptures, Pervaiz, Ahmad, Nadeem, [8].

Most of the research studies are based on the documentation of the historic significance of the Indus Valley Civilization and the discovery of artifacts found on these sites. The present research focused on the intricacy and diversity of the Indus civilization's sculptures in cultural and religious contexts. Moreover, a comparative study of Indus and Indian sculptures has been examined with material, technique, and subject matters which has not been documented before. The research is significant to place the sculptures within their broader cultural and historical framework and to investigate the social and religious context of the Indus Valley civilization to understand the significance of the sculptures.

3. Research Method

This research study employed a case method for qualitative research. A case method has several advantages for examining the Indus Valley art into several steps to a deeper understanding of this ancient civilization's artistic traditions. These include the process of developing sculptures and examining their characteristics and techniques. Hence, case study research goes beyond mere storytelling. Specifically, it incorporates the identification of reviewing the existing literature on the Indus valley sculptures, including books and research journals.

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, we relied on data from both primary and secondary sources. The former was archival materials collected from the extensive visits to the museums where artifacts are placed. Observational notes have been prepared based on the material and techniques used in these sculptures. Stylistic and iconographic analysis has been done to identify the material and techniques used and to interpret the symbolic meaning. Symbolism and motifs represented in the sculptures have been investigated thoroughly and compared with other contemporary cultures to draw parallels. Moreover, material analysis has been done on sculptures to analyze the composition of materials and understand the methods of production, which include stone, terracotta, and clay. For the deeper studies, a contextual examination was made to investigate the cultural and historical context of the sculptures, including their religious, social, and economic significance.

4. Results and Discussions

The art of the Indus Valley is explored through a contextual and stylistic analysis, revealing its influence on later art traditions in South Asia, showing a continuation of artistic values and methods. Excavations of Indus settlements have uncovered a wealth of artistic endeavors. These findings are vital for gaining insights into the creativity, lifestyles, and spiritual beliefs of the artists. Stone sculpture is exceedingly uncommon, and much of what has been found is rather rudimentary. All figurines seem to have been made for worship purposes. Such representations include seated males, reclining composite animals, or—in rare instances (from Harappa)—a standing naked male and a dancing figure. The most exquisite items are of high quality. There is a small yet significant collection of cast-bronze figurines, featuring both individual pieces and complete representations of dancing females, miniature chariots, carts, and animals. The

technical excellence of the bronzes suggests a well-established art form, although the number of pieces is still limited.

4.1 Religious and Cultural Significance

The clay sculptures may have held ceremonial or religious significance. The careful craftsmanship and repeated motifs in the figurines suggest a deeper purpose, maybe related to fertility rites, religion, or communal activities. Without a deciphered script or clear written records, the figurines become critical relics for understanding the spiritual and ceremonial rituals of the Indus Valley inhabitants. The significance of sculpture within the history of the Indus Valley civilization goes beyond the objects themselves, to the lack of certain types of creative expression. In contrast to other ancient societies like Mesopotamia and Egypt, the Indus Valley civilization lacks impressive architecture and grandiose statues of rulers or gods. This absence sparks intriguing questions about how society was organized, how it was governed, and perhaps the absence of a central authority. The significance of Indus Valley art is underscored by its ability to endure and convey a sense of unity and shared cultural identity across different regions of the civilization. The uniform artistic style found at various sites, from Harappa to Mohenjo-Daro, suggests a deep-rooted cultural legacy. This common artistic expression serves as a cultural bond that links various communities over the vast duration of civilization. Moreover, the artworks from the Indus Valley civilization, especially the clay figures and seals, serve as expressive carriers of a remote past. They describe a sophisticated culture with refined artistic sensibility, complex religious activities, and a well-organized economic framework. As experts attempt to comprehend the meanings inherent in the undeciphered writing and investigate the intricacies of these creative expressions, the sculptures continue to serve as windows to the ancient Indus Valley's inhabitants.

5. Material and Techniques

The sculptures, primarily constructed of terracotta, steatite, and bronze, demonstrate exceptional craftsmanship. Terracotta figurines were the Harappans' most popular form of sculpture to portray humans and animals, while bronze statues depicted animals, deities, and humans. The majority of figures are deities (possibly a Great Mother and a Great God), although other minor sculptures depicting moms with children or household occupations are most likely toys. Standing girls, typically heavily loaded with jewelry, make up the bulk, but there are also standing males, some with beards and horns. Terracotta creatures, carriages, and toys abound, including monkeys

perforated to climb a string and calves with nodding heads. Painted earthenware is the sole remaining evidence of a painting tradition. Much of the work is produced with boldness and delicacy of feeling, yet the limitations of the art allow little scope, Rahman [9]. Terracotta was typically shaped or compressed into shape before being burnt in a kiln to solidify. Stone was utilized to make massive sculptures and building features. The most often utilized materials include limestone, sandstone, and granite. Sculptures were often carved with chisels and other instruments. Bronze and copper were utilized to create metal goods like decorations and tools. Metal artwork is frequently cast using the lost-wax process, which includes creating a wax sculpture of the object and casting the metal around it. Pottery, sculpture, textiles, and other artefacts were decorated with natural paints and colors derived from minerals, plants, and insects. Dyes were often created by boiling natural materials in water and adding a fixative to help the color cling to the material. Engraving and embossing were traditional methods for decorating ceramics and other materials. Engraving entailed cutting designs onto the surface of a material with a sharp instrument, whereas stamping involved pressing an impression or mold into the surface to form a relief design.

Dancing girl (figure 2) from Mohenjo-Daro is one of the notable examples of bronze sculpture, which is thoroughly dated back to 2500 BCE. It is 10.5 cm high, 5 cm wide, and 2.5 cm deep. This relatively small yet distinctive statue demonstrates the expertise of the artisan. The statue is known as the 'Dancing Girl' due to her stance, which includes a right hand upon the back of her hip and her left hand lying down on her left thigh. Her features are striking, including wide eyes, wavy hair, and a flat nose. She looks to be wearing a necklace and several bracelets. Her hair is braided in the back and carefully put into a bun. Her arms are very lengthy, which is a frequent trait of objects from this period. Her head is slightly tilted backwards. An intriguing point to note is that the quantity of bangles on her hands varies. She had 24 bangles in one hand and four in the other. The sculpture was created utilizing the lost wax process, which involves pouring molten wax into a mold to form a model. The wax sculpture is subsequently coated with clay, leaving some holes for pathways. When the clay-covered molds are cooked in an oven, the wax melts come out. After the mold is made and cooled, the exterior clay layer is removed, and the solid bronze figure is finished, Kenoyer [10].



Fig 2: The Dancing Girl, Medium Bronze sculpture

(Source: <https://medium.com/@ayathamarajuspandana/two-of-the-finest-examples-of-indian-art-dancing-girl-mohenjo-daro-and-didarganj-chauri-9e28b8ef3ab9>)

The Priest-King statue (fig 3), found at Mohenjo-Daro, depicts a man seated in a ceremonial stance, implying religious or political importance. The archaeologist Kashinath Narayan Dikshit discovered it at the ancient site of Mohenjo-Daro, located in the current Sindh province of Pakistan, during an archaeological survey of India conducted between 1925 and 1926. This intricate statue, crafted from stone, stands as one of the most emblematic artifacts from the Indus Valley Civilization. The sculpture portrays an individual with partially closed eyes, curled ears, a beard, and thick lips, draped in cloth over the left shoulder and tucked under the now-damaged right arm. The surface of the garment features raised trefoil patterns and shallowly engraved circles. The figure's hair is parted in the middle and is held in place by a diadem embellished with a circular ornament, reminiscent of the one found on the right upper arm. Although it is challenging to ascertain the statue's original appearance, a fragment of shell inlay was located in one of its eyes, and remnants of old red pigment can still be seen within the garment's design, indicating that it had once been dyed and embellished with additional materials. The incised lines mimicking his beard extend into the cheeks, which were left unpolished, suggesting that the sculpture was not fully finished, Caspers [11].

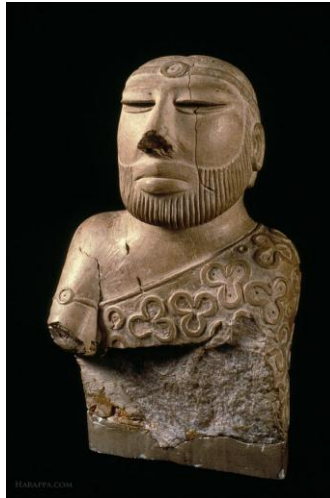


Fig.3: Priest-King

(Source: <https://smarthistory.org/the-priest-king-sculpture-from-the-indus-valley-civilization/>)

The sculpture of 'Mother Goddess' (fig 4) is one of the most intriguing from the Indus valley civilization, which was founded in 1931. The mother goddess symbolized motherhood, fertility, reproduction, and the continuation of life. Figurines are unique in terms of haircuts, body proportions, headdresses, and jewelry. Mother goddess is frequently portrayed with standing female figures wearing a loincloth and adorned with necklaces hanging over the breasts. Her jewelry, lace, and hair tie have been exaggerated. Her round eyeballs, which are expertly bonded, make the building come to life. A line has been drawn between the top and bottom lips. Her right hand smashed at the shoulder, while her left hand is shown dangling straight down, Bhattacharji [12].



Fig 4: Mother Goddess Figurine Medium: Terracotta

(Source: <https://prepp.in/news/e-492-mother-goddess-ancient-india-history-notes>)

5.1 Analysis between Indian sculptures and Indus sculptures

Comparison has been made among the sculptures of the Indus valley and Indian classical sculpture in terms of period, styles, and cultural settings. These two art traditions have distinct qualities that illustrate the growth of creative expression in ancient India. Terracotta and steatite were the most often utilized materials in the sculptures of the Indus valley civilization, with the techniques of clay carving and modelling. Sculptors in Indian classical art frequently used durable materials such as stone, as seen in the elaborate carvings found in temples such as the Khajuraho temples and Elephanta caves. Metal casting or bronze sculptures have also acquired popularity among Indian classical art. The sculptures from the Indus valley civilization portray a variety of topics, including human and animal forms with a particular emphasis on ritualistic or religious practices, while religious themes are common in sculptures of deities, mythical situations, and heavenly creatures in Indian classical art. The *Didarganj Yakshi* (fig 5) is a well-known ancient Indian sculpture from the Mauryan period (3rd century BCE). It was discovered at Didarganj, on the banks of the Ganges River, in 1917. The sculpture is a masterwork of Indian art, depicting the *Yakshi*, a feminine nature spirit or heavenly nymph in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. The *Didarganj Yakshi* (also known as the *Didarganj Chauri Bearer*) is a masterpiece of Mauryan art. This 5'4" tall figure was carved from a single piece of stone. This life-size standing figure is a tall, balanced, free-standing sculpture constructed of sandstone with a polished finish. The *chauri* is being held in the right hand, while the left hand is shattered. The bottom garment produces a slightly translucent look. Archaeologists commonly regard the *Didarganj Chauri Bearer* as one of the greatest and most valuable artefacts of ancient India, Jain [13].

Another example from Indian classical sculpture, *Nataraja* (fig 6), the Hindu deity Shiva, portrayed in his aspect as the cosmic dancer, is represented in metal or stone across numerous Shaivite temples, especially in South India. Shiva is depicted with four arms and flowing hair, dancing atop the figure of a dwarf, often identified as Apasmara (a representation of human ignorance; *apasmara* translates to “forgetfulness” or “heedlessness”). In his back right hand, Shiva holds the *damaru* (an hourglass-shaped drum); his front right hand is positioned in the *abhaya mudra* (the “fear-not” gesture, with the palm facing outward and fingers pointing upwards); the back left hand carries *agni* (fire) either in a vessel or in the palm; and the front left hand is across his chest in the *gajahasta* (elephant-trunk) pose, with a relaxed wrist and fingers

directed downward towards the elevated left foot. Shiva's hair is styled in multiple strands interspersed with flowers, a skull, a crescent moon, and the image of Ganga (the Ganges River personified as a goddess). His form is encircled by a ring of flames known as the *prabhamandala*. In classical Sanskrit texts on dance, this representation, the most prevalent form of Nataraja, is referred to as *bhujungatrasa* ("trembling of the snake"), Rothenstein [14].



Fig 5: The Didarganj Yakshi Medium: Polished sandstone

(Source: <https://medium.com/@ayathamarajuspandana/two-of-the-finest-examples-of-indian-art-dancing-girl-mohenjo-daro-and-didarganj-chauri-9e28b8ef3ab9>)

The sculptures of the Indus Valley civilization give insights into several cultural features and their significance. Several sculptures represent hypothetical deities, suggesting a religious link. The clarity of animal pictures might imply cultural value. Sculptures may have helped to enforce societal norms and values. Trade and interaction sculpture with detailed carvings may serve as a means of communication or identification in trade. The variety of materials employed (terracotta, steatite, and bronze) may reflect cultural exchange. Symbolic motifs in sculptures may represent a cohesive cultural identity. Despite these findings, the Indus script's indecipherability impacts an in-depth understanding of the civilization's cultural intricacies. The sculptures, on the other

hand, continue to be important relics that give information on the Indus Valley civilization's complex and fascinating culture.



Fig 6: *Nataraja*

(Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nataraja>)

Sculptures from the Indus valley used natural materials like terracotta and bronze with techniques like lost-wax casting, while modern Indian sculptures utilized a broader range of materials, including modern synthetic ones, and incorporate both traditional and contemporary techniques. Indus Valley sculptures focused on religious and daily life themes, often serving ritualistic purposes, while modern Indian sculptures explored a wider array of themes, including mythology and modern social issues, with functions ranging from religious to purely aesthetic. Based on stylistical studies, the Indus valley characterized the realistic and detailed depictions, while modern art combined the traditional realism with abstract and expressive forms.

6. Conclusion

The sculptures of the Indus Valley civilization provide valuable insights into the cultural, religious, and socio-economic aspects of this ancient society. These intricate clay figures offer a glimpse into the everyday lives and spiritual beliefs of the people. The sculptures act as a cultural thread that connects diverse groups across the vast span of civilization, highlighting a shared artistic heritage. Moreover, the materials and techniques utilized in Mohenjo-Daro and Harappan

art show a high degree of workmanship and artistic ability. The artworks created during this time present the diverse social and cultural traditions of the Indus Valley civilization. Furthermore, the art of the Harappan civilization, especially Mohenjo-Daro, indicates that the art produced by this civilization was extremely complex and represented the religious and cultural views of the people who created it. The Indus Valley civilization, apart from other cultures, is characterized by the absence of monumental sculptures or large-scale depictions of kings or deities. The consistent artistic style found across various locations suggests a shared culture among the people. The terracotta figures with their intricate details and stylized representations of humans and animals, offer a glimpse into the daily life, attire, and possibly religious beliefs of the Harappans. Indian classical art sculptures, made from durable materials like stone and metal, depict religious themes and mythical situations, showcasing the growth of creative expression in ancient India. The evolution from Indus Valley sculptures to modern Indian classical sculptures highlights a significant transformation in materials, techniques, and thematic exploration. While the ancient sculptures were deeply rooted in religious and daily life depictions, modern sculptures reflect a blend of tradition and contemporary influences, addressing a broader spectrum of themes and purposes. This comparative analysis underscores the rich and dynamic heritage of South Asian art and its enduring legacy. Further research is needed to completely grasp the art of the Harappan civilization and its significance in Indian classical art.

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