
Title of Object

Vajrabhairava

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Culture: Tibetan

Date of Object: 18th century

Country: Tibet

Accession Number: 89.52

File Created: 10/7/2016

Material/Medium: Opaque colors and gold on cotton

Author of File: Brenda Haines

Department: Chinese, South and Southeast Asian Art

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

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Tour Topics

Symbolism-art, symbolism-in-art, Group 6, Highlights 1600 to 1850, thangka, thanka, ceremony/ritual, Buddhism, death, afterlife, bodhisattva,

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. Take a moment to look closely at the imagery. How does it make you feel?
 2. Why do you think the artist painted such dark images?
 3. Do you have any objects or images that help you relax and think or reflect?
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Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

What are Thangkas?

Scroll-paintings, better known as thangkas (“tonkas”), are intended as temporary dwelling places for the spiritual beings they depict and thus are not aesthetic objects but roosting places, actual dwellings for the energies projected into them with the aid of mantras which are often inscribed upon them.

Thangkas are not meant for permanent display, but rather are typically unrolled and viewed on special occasions.

Tibetan Thangka's are typically painted on cotton which has been stretched across a wooden support and primed with a mixture of animal glue and kaolin, a white earth powder. The artist lays out the composition, frequently using a grid system, following strict rules of representation, scale and arrangement. The relative sizes of the figures in the scene reflect the degree of their spiritual perfection and the entire entourage is typically arranged symmetrically around a central figure.

Most of the pigments used were mineral, for instance, lapis lazuli and azurite for blue, malachite for green, and cinnabar and other red and yellow earth colors for warmer tones. Black was derived from soot and white from kaolin. Organic colors such as lac (red) and indigo (blue) were also used. The colors, mixed with warm animal glue (distemper) and water, had to be applied quickly, before the glue cooled and became difficult to apply evenly. The finished painting was removed from its wood supports and mounted with silk borders.

Paintings were not considered complete until consecrated with ceremonies which evoked and installed the spirit of the deities depicted within the painting. Thus empowered, the painting would enable the devotee to have access to such deities for purposes of worship and communication and are therefore used as aids to meditation.

Inscriptions were normally written on the back of the painting during or after the ceremony, including mantras (om, ah, hum) placed typically behind the forehead, throat, and heart centers (chakras) of all the deities in the painting. Sacred creeds were also recorded and sometimes the name of the consecrator or his spiritual lineage was included.

(Sources: Wikipedia and Met Museum *Art of South and Southeast Asia* and *Sacred Visions*)

Why do these Gods look so scary?

"Tibetan Buddhism depicts deities whose appearance so contradicts the common expectation, that they are immediately misunderstood. The sight of apparently demonic beings dancing on the walls of a sacred temple, alongside the expected images of tranquil deities with gentle faces, both misleads and bewilders uninitiated viewers. As mentioned above, deities may appear in different emanations, in tantric as well as non-tantric form, in which case they are depicted as different beings. The figures of horrific aspect are tantric. Seen within the same [object], even side by side,...these contrasting images of serenity and ferocity provide a jolting change of visual rhythm, and an almost emotional dynamism.

These "terrifying deities" apparently derive from several sources. Some were absorbed from Indian Tantrism; others have a native Tibetan origin. According to legend, when Padmasambhava came to Tibet to establish Buddhism, he encountered hostile local gods, whom he vanquished and bound over to serve the new faith. According to various theories, they may have been indigenous gods of the folk religion, or gods from the "old religion," i.e., Bon. Armed and fierce, they guard the entrances to sacred places, combat evil, and show human beings the way to defeat negative emotions that block the way to enlightenment.

Tantric gods are depicted with thick limbs and powerful bodies, their faces contorted and grimacing, eyes glaring, fangs flashing in their open mouths. They brandish sharp weapons and their feet trample the bodies of small beings in human shape. Their figures are cloaked in flame, their hair and eyebrows ablaze. Some wear a crown of skulls, others a necklace of severed human heads. Some drink blood from empty skulls. Tantric deities may have a single head and two arms, but often they have multiple heads

and limbs, and some have animal heads. Uninstructed viewers take them to be monsters, and wonder why they are given such prominent place on [temple] walls or in thangkas. But the recognition that deities may take such wrathful as well as peaceful forms is fundamental to an understanding of Tibetan iconology and art. It has also been observed that the terrifying deities harness or sublimate the violence that is a reality both of the cosmos and the human personality.

In Buddhist theory, these deities, although given human form (that is, with arms, legs, and faces) are personified visualizations of energy, determination, and invincible will--abstractions depicted through figurative representation. In the same way, the peaceful deities are symbolic representations of compassion, wisdom, and insight.

The concept that a deity may have several emanations or manifestations, a feature common to both Hinduism and Buddhism, is one of the factors that has led to the multiplicity of divinities. Thus Krishna, for example, is an avatar or incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, and the fierce Vajrabhairava—seen in our thangka—is a manifestation of the Buddhist Manjushri, the great Bodhisattva of wisdom....The relation of a deity to such emanations is sometimes visually represented by placing above the head of the god a smaller head or figure of the deity with which that god is spiritually connected.” So that is why you see the bodhisattva Manjushri is at the very center above Vajrabhairava.

“The little figures whom these deities trample beneath their feet are not helpless human beings but rather malignant spirits or representations of those hostile forces that we need to overcome. By their example, the wrathful deities inspire courage and strengthen determination; greed and anger can be defeated, with the same energy and will shown by the warrior god.”

(Source: Tibetan Buddhist Wall Paintings, Brown University)

Vajrabhairava's Origin

Vajrabhairava is also known as Yamantaka. He is an emanation of the bodhisattva of wisdom, Manjushri. “Known by his epithet Yamantaka (Slayer of Yama, the Lord of Death), Vajrabhairava personifies the victory of spiritual wisdom over death. Ferocious and commanding, this buffalo-headed Buddhist deity subjugates gods, demons, birds, and animals that stand for evil and suffering. A garland of severed heads, symbolizing the conquest of the ego, hangs from his neck. The implements in his ... hands represent different aspects of spiritual knowledge. Many are weapons that he uses to destroy various obstacles to Enlightenment. This otherwise terrifying deity is a cosmic emanation of Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom.” (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts)

Origin: Yama is the lord of hell and god of death. He is sometimes depicted with a water buffalo's head. According to the origin story, robbers stole a water buffalo and dragged it into a cave, where they slaughtered it by cutting off its head. In that same cave, though, lived a yogini who witnessed their crime. He pleaded with the robbers to spare his life as he was close to enlightenment after years of meditation, but they did not listen and cut off his head, too, to silence him. Because of the yogini's advanced powers, his body retained a life of its own, and he seized the buffalo's head and placed it upon his own neck, then killed the robbers and went on a rampage of fury, killing people all through the countryside. The terrified people appealed to the bodhisattva Manjushri for protection and he, in the tantric form of Yamantaka, then fought and conquered Yama. Yamantaka, with a vajra in his hair, is Vajrabhairava, a wrathful or terrific manifestation of Manjushri -- thus a form of wisdom, the wisdom

that perceives ultimate reality, and that which triumphs over evil, suffering and death. (Mills, pp. 86-87 and *Tibetan Buddhist Wall Paintings*)

“There are two different systems for depicting the nine faces of Vajrabhairava. The first system is called [1] Stacked Faces (zhal tseg) and the second is called [2] Circular Faces (zhal kor). The first, Stacked Faces is considered the older system and can be found depicted primarily in the paintings and sculpture of the Sakya, Marpa Kagyu, Jonang and Shangpa Kagyu Traditions. The second system of Circular Faces is depicted in the Gelug Tradition.” Our thangka shows the circular faces of the deity, and is connected to the Gelug order (yellow hat). “Vajrabhairava with nine Circular Faces is defined by the central face being that of a buffalo with three additional faces placed to the immediate right side and three more faces placed to the immediate left side. Above the central buffalo face are two more faces one above the other. The orange face of Manjushri is identified as the uppermost face. This orientation is called Circular Faces.” (Himalayan Art Resources; see the resources for a diagram of these.)

(To see another iteration of Yamantaka, see the mandala in the same gallery: This is the Yamantaka mandala, a cosmic blueprint of the celestial palace of the deity Yamantaka, Conqueror of Death, who is represented at the center by the blue vajra, or thunderbolt.)

Vajrabhairava's Weapons

Each of Vajrabhairava's 32 hands bears a weapon. Here's a sampling:

Skull club: symbolizes the cessation or death of karmic predispositions and represents the ultimate emptiness of all phenomena. As a weapon it terrifies all demons and subjugates all the vicious spirits of the three realms. In its most wrathful form, the skull has eyes hanging from its empty, bloody sockets, flames emanating from its mouth, and smoke coming out of its nostrils.

Impaled corpse club: takes the form of a human corpse impaled upon a long wooden stake which passes through the victim's anus or (rarely) vagina. This horrific form of execution was a common form of retribution after a war when the victors would humiliate the vanquished. It was also used during the Catholic Inquisition for those accused of sodomy or licentious sexual activity. In medieval India, death by impaling was also used during certain rituals of human sacrifice.

As a hand-held attribute, the impaled corpse is frequently identified as that of a criminal and its form symbolizes that no matter how defiled the practitioner, the meditational practice of Buddhism can absolve all evil karmas because all phenomena are ultimately empty or devoid of substance.

On an inner level, the penetration of the stake through the anus symbolizes the completion stage of tantric practice whereby the psychic winds enter, abide, and dissolve inside, liberating the corpse of egoism.

Axe: symbolizes the severing of all negative emotions and concepts from the mind.

Hammer: symbolizes the smashing of evil dispositions, especially avarice, covetousness, and miserliness.

Wooden pestle: symbolizes the revitalization of memory and the concentration of intuitive knowledge or cognition. May assume sexual symbolism whereby a phallic pestle is pounded against the orifice of a mortar, crushing demonic enemies.

Triangular Brazier: contains wisdom fire which burns away spiritual obstacles or hindrances. Fire also symbolizes that the essence of all phenomena is “clear light” or the most subtle level of mind. (Everything burns with the same flame and ends as ashes.) Entrails along with the brazier symbolizes the “illusory body” and the attainment of “clear light” respectively.

Sword: symbol of wisdom, or the discriminating awareness that cuts through the veil of ignorance and obfuscation. Also symbolizes the granting of the 8 great powers of psychic attainment (discriminating awareness and clairvoyant vision, fleetness of foot, invisibility, alchemic immortality, the transmutation of matter, flight and/or translocation, multiple manifestation, and the ability to transverse all realms of existence.) It’s double edged blade symbolizes the unity of relative and absolute truth; it’s sharp point the perfection of wisdom, and it’s fiery flames the blazing of wisdom awareness fire toward the 10 directions.

Shield: paired with the sword as the twin weapons of defense and attack. Penetrating sword is held in the right, male, or method hand, and the defensive shield is held in the left, female, or wisdom hand. Vajrabhairava’s shield represents the Buddha’s triumph over the attack of Mara, victory over all enemies, and his protection of all beings through the unassailable wisdom of the Buddha.

Dart or Shakti Dagger: (a triangular dart with a flight of three peacock feathers.) The three sides of the blade symbolize the destruction of the three primary poisons of ignorance, desire, and aversion and the three peacock feathers represent Vajrabhairava’s victory over the three realms. The union of blade and feathered flight also symbolizes purification of the dualistic conception of “subject and object” distinctions.

Trident: (an early aniconic representation of the Buddha.) The three prongs represent the three jewels of the Buddha’s teachings on ethics, meditation, and wisdom. Also symbolizes the destruction of the three poisons, with primordial ignorance being transmuted into the wisdom fire of its central prong. Also symbolizes the deity’s victory over the three realms and the three times and the three kayak and the emptiness or unity of body, speech, and mind.

Spear: symbolizes the piercing or impaling of all false views and distorted notions.

Harpoon: (a spear with rope attached to its shaft.) Symbolizes the piercing of ignorance with discriminating awareness, or the wisdom that overcomes the faults of body, speech, and mind. A paired symbol: the sharp point of the head represents wisdom and its retrieval rope represents mindfulness or recollection.

4 faced head of Brahma: symbolizes the severing of all conceptualizations and the development of altruism through the four immeasurables of compassion, love, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

Severed arms and leg: A right forearm and hand with four extended fingers symbolizes dexterity in performing the four tantric activities of pacifying, increasing, subjugating, and destroying. A severed left forearm with a raised pointer symbolizes Vajrabhairava’s wrath and the terror that he instills in all sinister (left-handed) demonic enemies. A severed lower leg and foot symbolizes that Vajrabhairava swiftly leads all beings along the path to enlightenment.

Intestines or Entrails: Intestines represent the realization of the insubstantiality of the inherent existence of all phenomena since they digest varied and delicious food stuffs and transform all into the

same common excrement. Entrails, when depicted with fresh blood in a skull cap, represent the union of relative and absolute truth.

Skull cup: a freshly cut skull cup (with peeling scalp and hair attached) full of blood signifies that Vajrabhairava's mental continuum (scalp and hair) is filled with the nectar (blood) of great compassion.

Cemetery Shroud: Symbolizes Vajrabhairava's triumph over death and his destruction of the ignorance that perceives phenomena as independently self-existing. Just as the shroud veils the "corpse" of selflessness, the removal of this veil eliminates the obscurations to the realization of emptiness. The seamless shroud also symbolizes the death of all fabrications and attachments.

The Wind-cloth: (A fan used to fan a fire.) Symbolically blows away all obscurations as it increases the fiery heat of the wisdom-fire. The changeable and billowing form of the cloth also symbolizes the illusory nature of all phenomena.

(Source: Robert Beer, *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*)

Palden Lhamo (Glorious Goddess):

According to Mia's description: Palden Lhamo on horseback is a protector deity found at the bottom, center of the Thangka. She is the only feminine Dharmapala; she is as ferocious in aspect as any of them.

"Palden Lhamo (Glorious Goddess) is a Tibetan form of the ancient Indian goddess Shridevi. Like her Indian precursor, Palden Lhamo rides a mule whose haunch is marked with an eye, an iconographic element associated with an early myth surrounding Shridevi. Once, while queen of Sri Lanka, Shridevi strenuously objected to her husband's practice of human sacrifice and threatened to kill their son if her husband's barbarism did not cease. When human sacrifice continued, she carried out her promise. As the goddess mounted a mule (covered with the flayed skin of her son) to flee the kingdom, the king aimed an arrow in her direction, hitting the mule's haunch. Shridevi removed the arrow and magically transformed the wound into an eye, thus augmenting her powers to see and watch over the realms of the Buddhist faith....Although little is known about her early veneration, when worshiped by the Sakya and then the Gelukpa order, especially from the sixteenth century onward, this goddess became associated with the protection of Lhasa and of the Dalai Lama."

(Source: *Tibetan Buddhist Wall Paintings and Sacred Visions*)

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

Buddhism in Tibet

"Tibet officially declared Buddhism its main religion around the 6th or 7th century CE, after the faith had spread through India, China, Korea, Japan, and all places in between. By the time Tibet adopted Buddhism, it had been modified and expanded into a broader belief system. Buddhists in Tibet practice a mix of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism; the latter is also known as "Esoteric Buddhism." Tibetans began representing wrathful deities and other aspects of esoteric images, along with inspirations from traditional Indian sources, all influenced by Buddhist art that had been transmitted around Asia. Notable forms of Tibetan art include complex geometric mandalas, elaborate visual metaphors featuring deities, and meditative sculptures of the Buddha." (Source: *Secrets of Buddhist Art*, The Frist)

Groups within Tibetan Buddhism

- Nyingmapa: Founded by Padmasambhava, this is oldest sect, noted in the West for the teachings of the Tibetan Book of the Dead.
- Kagyupa: Founded by Tilopa (988-1069), the Kagyupa tradition is headed by the Karmapa Lama. Important Kagyupa teachers include Naropa, Marpa, and Milarepa.
- Sakyapa: Created by Gonchok Gyelpo (1034-1102) and his son Gunga Nyingpo (1092-1158).
- Gelugpa: (The Virtuous School) Founded by Tsong Khapa Lobsang Drakpa (also called Je Rinpoche) (1357 - 1419), this tradition is headed by the Dalai Lama.” (Source: BBC)

“Developed by the 6th century in India, Esoteric Buddhism incorporated many different practices to induce the state of enlightenment. A large number of folk gods as well as Hindu deities entered the Buddhist pantheon. This form of Buddhism is known as esoteric because stress was placed on transmission of secret formulas (mantra), gestures (mudra), and diagrams (mandala) from master to pupil. Tibetan Buddhism, known as Vajrayana, is the most prevalent form of Esoteric Buddhism, but other sects also incorporate esoteric practices, notably the Shingon (True Word) sect of Japan.” (artsmia.org)

“Although it is not known when Vajrayana Buddhism first developed, by the seventh century it had become firmly established in India and was taught in the major Buddhist centers and universities. Also known as the “diamond vehicle” because it promised the expedience of enlightenment within a single lifetime, Vajrayana Buddhism appealed to Buddhist rulers and practitioners throughout Asia. Monks from Nepal and Tibet traveled to Buddhist universities in eastern India, such as Nalanda. It was at such monastic universities that Vajrayana techniques and practices were taught and art was made and seen. Monks returned with their new knowledge, influencing the teachings, iconography and aesthetics of Buddhism and Buddhist art at home.

Such scholar-monks, also known as great adepts (mahasiddha), were very important to the spread and longevity of Vajrayana Buddhism. Unlike other Buddhist traditions, Vajrayana places great emphasis on the pupil–guru relationship. Highly secretive esoteric rituals and complex meditative yogic exercises cannot be learned from texts alone. They require the aid of a skilled and knowledgeable teacher. Famous teachers were immortalized in art and worshiped alongside images of Buddhist deities and the various Buddhas within the Vajrayana pantheon....” (Source: Norton Simon Museum)

For instance, five lineage gurus of the Gelugpa (yellow hat) order appear at the top of our thangka. The Gelugpa order, despite being the youngest, is the largest and most important branch of Tibetan Buddhism and is the one associated with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. (These figures are difficult to see, but I think may include the Buddha Shakyamuni himself; Atisa (died 1054) who carried Buddhist texts from India to Tibet; and the reformist teacher Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), the founder of the Gelugpa order.)

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

This black-ground thangka would have guided an advanced practitioner in meditation focused on overcoming the fear of death. The central deity, Vajrabhairava, is depicted in his most ferocious form with numerous heads, including a water buffalo's as his central head. Each of his 32 arms bears a

weapon and he tramples demons and Hindu gods underfoot. The image's ferocity was intended to protect the practitioner from their own fears and delusion when meditating on this difficult subject. Other protector deities surround Vajrabhairava, including the goddess Palden Lhamo on horseback at the bottom center, functioning to empower the practitioner. Five lineage gurus of the Gelugpa (yellow hat) order appear overhead, and the bodhisattva Manjushri is at the very center.

The theme of death is further conveyed by the grizzly setting, likely a cremation ground, where frightening creatures run amok and blood, guts, brains, and eyeballs appear in offering vessels.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Robert Beer, *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*, Shambhala, Boston 2003. (A large sample of the text is located on google books: Preview of Beer, [Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols](#).)

Vajrabhairava Yamantaka, wood sculpture at Virginia Museum of Fine Arts: [Vajrabhairava Yamantaka](#)

Thangkas, article on Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thangka>

[The Art of South and Southeast Asia](#), Resource for Educators (PDF), Metropolitan Museum

Tibetan Buddhist Wall Paintings of Mustang, Nepal, Philip and Marcia R. Lieberman, Brown University (online exhibit): [Tibetan Buddhist Wall Paintings](#)

[Himalayan Art Resources](#), website run by Jeff Watt, a leading scholar of Himalayan art.

[Examples of Vajrabhairava's 9 circular faces](#), from Himalayan Art Resources.

[Sacred Visions: Early Paintings From Central Tibet](#), Metropolitan Museum Publication. Here is a link to the MetMuseum publication page:

http://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/sacred_visions_early_paintings_from_central_tibet#

Worlds of Transformation: Tibetan Art of Wisdom and Compassion, Marylin Rhie and Robert Thurman, Tibet House of NY Publishers, 1999

Martin A. Mills, *Identity, Ritual and State in Tibetan Buddhism: The Foundations of Authority in Gelukpa Monasticism*, RoutledgeCurzon, London and New York.

[Tibetan Buddhism](#), BBC, Religions.

Norton Simon Museum, [In the Land of Snow: Buddhist Art of the Himalayas](#).

[Secrets of Buddhist Art: Tibet, Japan, and Korea](#), Educator Resource Guide, The Frist, Center for the Visual Arts.