

Anonymous

Chakrasamvara and Vajravarahi

Nepal, late Malla to early Shah period, late 18th-early 19th century

Gilded bronze, garnets, turquoise

Gift of The Christensen Fund, 2001

(10872.1)

In this sculpture, the god Chakrasamvara and his spouse, Vajravarahi, are shown in a passionate sexual embrace. This depiction is not intended to be erotic; the Tibetan word for such representation is *yab-yum*, which literally means “father-mother.” These figures express a fundamental concept of Buddhism, the primordial or mystical union of transcendental wisdom and compassion (embodied respectively by the female and male). Although the original base is missing, they would have stood on two figures that symbolized obstacles to enlightenment.

Anonymous

Mahakala

Tibet, 19th century

Thangka painting; ink, colors and gold on cotton

Gift of the Christensen Fund, 2001

(10900.1)

Shadbhujja Mahakala (or the “Great Black One with Six Hands”) is a wrathful emanation of Avalokiteshvara and is the most widespread protective deity in Tibet. Enveloped in a ring of billowing flames, he is wearing a *dorje*-topped row of skulls and a tiger skin loincloth, with a garland of severed heads strung along human intestines. The heads are those of male sacrificial victims and symbolize the decapitation of demonic enemies or delusions. The attributes of Mahakala are depicted in each of his six hands: towards his heart, he holds a curved knife and a skull cap; in his lower outstretched hands, a hand-drum and a noose; and in his upper hands, a skull rosary and a trident.

Adorned with bone and gold ornaments, and clothed in an elephant skin, he stands with his right leg bent and left leg extended atop the body of an elephant-headed figure. The wrathful offering of the five senses, including severed heads, spills out of two skull cups at the base of the lotus throne. Surrounded by the “fires of pristine awareness” is the retinue, or followers of Mahakala, who are also manifestations of wrathful *dharma* protectors.

Directly above Mahakala is Vajradhara (the primordial Buddha). Dark blue in color, seated peacefully, he holds a *vajra* in his right hand and a bell expressing the non-duality of ultimate reality in his left hand. The two figures flanking Vajradhara are historical figures from the Gelugpa, or “Yellow Hat” School. According to their inscription, Gyal Cho Thubden Jamhatso is on the far right and Gyalwa Nyipa is on the far left. The two figures seated slightly below Vajradhara are the Indian *mahasiddhas*, Mei Tipa (right) and Saraha (left). Two other *mahasiddhas* can be seen below imbedded in landscape scenes. *Mahasiddhas*, or “great adepts,” are depicted in Tibetan Buddhist art as models of the behavior and practices that lead to enlightenment.

Anonymous ***Vaishravana***

Tibet, ca. early 15th century

Thangka painting; ink, colors and gold on cotton

Purchase, Marjorie Lewis Griffing Fund, 1992

(7098.1)

This *thangka* depicts Vaishravana, Guardian of the North. Vaishravana, who in Tibet is both a directional guardian and a god of wealth, rides a roaring snow lion against a deep blue background. The figure is dressed in ornate Chinese-style armor, and wears a magnificent gold crown on his head. In his right hand he holds a banner, and in his left hand holds a mongoose (a symbol of wealth), which spits out jewels from its mouth.

In the long horizontal register at the top of the painting are nine figures, including the Cosmic Buddha Vajradhara at the center, a wrathful deity (possibly the White Mahakala), and seven Tibetan lamas. Just below this register, at the extreme right and left, are lamas of the Black Hat and Red Hat sects respectively. Nine celestial Yaksha generals on horseback, all attendants of Vaishravana, are shown around the central figure and in a row at the bottom of the painting. In addition, there are small figures of dwarfs, an early Tibetan king and queen with attendants, and the painting's donor (seated at the bottom left corner).

The figure of Vaishravana and the lion on which he rides are borrowed from Chinese paintings of the 14th and early 15th centuries, and reflect the close political ties between China and Tibet that were first established by the Mongol emperors of the Yuan dynasty (1260-1368).

Anonymous

Akshobhya

Tibet, ca. late 13th century

Thangka painting; ink, colors and gold on cotton

Purchase, 1991

(6191.1)

This rare and beautiful painting is a *thangka*, or Tibetan religious image, that played a key role in Buddhist ritual and meditation. The central figure is Akshobhya, one of five cosmic Buddhas in the Tantric Buddhist pantheon. Akshobhya's skin is deep blue, and he wears a crown and jewelry. He is seated on an elaborate lotus throne, surrounded by a profusion of finely painted scrolls and animals. Flanking Akshobhya are two bodhisattvas; just above these figures are smaller monks and other deities.

The central zone of the *thangka* is surrounded by sixteen horizontal registers of small meditating Buddhas. These are the Five Cosmic Buddhas, and are differentiated by their colors, which repeat: blue (Akshobhya), yellow (Ratnasambhava), red (Amitabha), green (Amoghasiddhi), and white (Vairocana). They represent the center and the four cardinal directions of metaphysical space, and symbolize the belief that the Dharma (the Buddhist law) permeates all parts of the universe. The style of the *thangka* is closely related to Nepalese painting and ultimately derives from Indian Buddhist painting of the Pala period (9th-11th centuries).

Anonymous
Shakyamuni

Eastern Tibet, 19th century

Thangka painting; ink, colors and gold on cotton

Gift of the Christensen Fund, 2001

(10901.1)

The central figure of this *thangka* is Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, who is seated in a gesture known as the earth-touching *mudra*, symbolizing the moment of his enlightenment. His left hand, or the “wisdom” hand, holds an alms-bowl decorated with small strings of pearls. Shakyamuni sits enthroned on a moon disk on top of a lotus pedestal, and is flanked by his two primary disciples, Sariputra and Maudgalyayana.

Directly in front of Shakyamuni’s lion throne are ritual offerings including grain, precious jewels, the wheel of life, and the three fruits, which represent the trinity of Buddha, *dharma*, and *sangha*. Seated before the altar table is the founder of the Gelugpa, or “Yellow Hat” school, Je Tsongkhapa (1357-1419). He is posed with a sword and a book in honor of Manjushri, who can be seen in the upper left corner.

On the opposite side of Manjushri is Maitreya holding his attributes: the dharma wheel and water ewer. Vajradhara, the supreme Buddha who represents the ideal, realized mind, is held up by a *garuda* (mythical bird) above Shakyamuni. It is traditional for Kagyu artists to place an image of Vajradhara at the top center of paintings to acknowledge him as the originator of the Kagyu lineage and its teachings.

Anonymous

Vajradhara and Prajnaparamita

Nepal, Malla period, 17th century

Gilded bronze

Gift of the Christensen Fund, 2001

(10892.1)

This sculpture probably depicts the supreme deity of Himalayan Buddhism, Vajradhara, “holder of the diamond scepter.” Vajradhara is usually identified by the *vajra* (originally a weapon, converted into a symbol of enlightenment) in his right hand and the bell in his left hand, crossed over his heart. In many schools of Himalayan Buddhism, Vajradhara is considered the primordial Buddha from which all other deities, and indeed all teachings of Buddhism, are manifested. Appropriately, his consort is Prajnaparamita, the “perfection of wisdom”; together, they embody the most fundamental virtues of compassion and wisdom that lead Buddhist practitioners across the sea of ignorance to the “other shore” of enlightenment.

Anonymous

Events in the Life of Kōbō Daishi

Japan, Kamakura period (1185-1336), late 13th-early 14th century

Handscroll; ink and color on paper

Gift of Robert Allerton, 1952

(1689.1)

Executed in the classical Yamato-e technique, this is one of the best-preserved Kamakura-period narrative handscrolls in American collections. The scroll consists of fragments of three sections depicting key events in the life of Kūkai (Kōbō Daishi, 774-835), founder of the Esoteric Shingon Buddhism in Japan. Originally, the scroll included at least ten scenes, several of which are now in private Japanese collections. The section on display here shows Kūkai as a young child discussing Buddhist doctrine with three bodhisattvas that have magically appeared to him, while the women of the household sleep nearby.

Born into an aristocratic family, Kūkai was a precocious youth. As a young man he studied Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism. At the age of seventeen, he wrote a work entitled *Indications of the Three Teachings* in which he showed the superiority of Buddhism over the other two philosophies. In 804 Kūkai sailed to China; upon arrival he went to the great Tang capital of Chang'an, where he studied Esoteric Buddhism with the master Huiguo (746-805). He returned to Japan in 806 and ten years later began the construction of a monastery on Mount Kōya (Wakayama Prefecture) that would become the headquarters of the Shingon sect. Kūkai introduced many of the key Esoteric texts and rituals to Japanese Buddhist practice.