

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Vajrabhairava*** ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

Cotton support with opaque mineral pigments in waterbased (collagen) binder

18.25 x 28.0 inches

Central or Eastern Tibet

Ca. 17th century

Indeterminate style

Museum #: 92.065

By Cathleen Cummings

26 May, 1998

Vajrabhairava is a wrathful manifestation of Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. His is the enduring, adamant wisdom of ultimate reality which triumphs over suffering and death. He is known also as Yamantaka because he is the conqueror of Yama, the Lord of Death, who appears with the face of a buffalo. Of Vajrabhairava's nine heads, the central one is that of the buffalo, symbolic of his defeat over Yama. The top-most head is that of Manjusri himself. Because of his manifold power Vajrabhairava was called upon to oppose all enemies of the doctrine, to keep the uninitiated away from the tantras.

In his thirty-four arms Vajrabhairava bears symbols of the thirty-four elements of highest enlightenment. In his principal right and left hands he holds the flaying knife and the *kapala*, a skull cup filled with blood. A freshly flayed elephant skin, symbolic of vanquished ignorance, is held in his upper-most pair of hands. Bluish-black in color, Vajrabhairava stands in an aura of flame and with the might of his sixteen legs he tramples upon the enemies of Buddhist doctrine. The garland of freshly severed heads around his neck is a sign that he has overcome egotistic instincts. Although sometimes represented as a Solitary Hero, here Vajrabhairava is shown with his consort Vajravetalia, and their union is the coming together of wisdom and compassion from which enlightenment is born.

Vajrabhairava is one of the most important transformative deities of the Gelukpa sect and is especially closely connected with Tsong-kha-pa, the founder of the Gelukpa lineage who is pictured at the top of this painting. Surrounding Vajrabhairava are many of the other guardians and protectors of Buddhism. At top right is Four-Armed Mahakala, and at top left is Grgi-mGonpo, Mahakala in his form as "protector of the tent." Vajrabhairava at center is flanked by Manjusri to his right and Vajrapani to his left. Below the central figure are more wrathful protectors; from viewer's left to right they are: Six-Armed Mahakala; Palden Lhamo, and Yama with his consort Yamari. Along the bottom of the painting are four more guardians, Vaisravana, Pita Jambala, Yon-gyis bdagpo ("the perfection of giving"), and a fourth two-armed figure identified by inscription as "Itram nag" ("the hard black one"), an obscure form of Mahakala.

References:

Marilyn M. Rhie and Robert A. F. Thurman, *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet*, New York: The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Tibet House, New York, and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991, p. 36.

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