

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Buddhas Akshobya and Ratnasambhava, each surrounded by 200 Taras*** ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

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

Ca. 16th or 17th century

Museum #: 97.278

By Kim Masteller

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Depictions of jina, or victor, Buddhas are common in Tibetan art. The jinas are abstract beings which symbolize the totality of enlightenment. The goddess Tara is also a subject of great importance in Himalayan Buddhism. She offers protection to the practitioner in the manner of a Bodhisattva. She is also considered to be fully-enlightened, and the Mother of All Buddhas. What is unique about these two paintings of Buddhas Akshobya and Ratnasambhava, each surrounded by 200 Taras, is that they bring these two iconographic conceptions together into one set of paintings.

The two paintings are identical in size and figure style, and are likely from a set of five paintings, which also depicted the jina Buddhas Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi, and Vairocana. The painting depicting the blue jina is of Akshobya, the first Buddha in the jina cycle, followed by the yellow Ratnasambhava in the second painting. These five Buddhas never existed in a material or earthly form, as did Buddha Shakyamuni. Instead, they are abstract conceptions invoked through meditation.

The function of the jinas is to assist the advanced practitioner in realizing his or her enlightenment. The jinas reside at the inner circle of many mandalas, with Vairocana at the center. The other four jinas and the entire mandalic system emanate from Vairocana. During meditation, practitioners visualize themselves as each of the Buddhas, finally recognizing that they are, in fact, Vairocana Buddha. It is this realization of the sameness of all things, mundane and enlightened, that allows the practitioner to achieve a state of enlightenment.

The iconography of these paintings is unusual, and may be unique. The inclusion of 1,000 images of Tara emphasizes concepts of motherhood, and Tara as the source of Buddhas. Moreover, this conflation of Taras and Buddhas serves to reinforce the understanding that all Buddhas and enlightened beings are identical, regardless of their identity or gender.

The five jina Buddhas each embody a particular insight necessary for total attainment. Akshobya transforms hate into ultimate-reality-perfection insight. Ratnasambhava transforms pride into yellow equality insight. Amitabha transforms lust into red discriminating insight. Amoghasiddhi transforms envy into green all-accomplishing insight. Finally, Vairocana turns delusion into mirror-like insight. (Rhie and Thurman, 334)

Surrounding the central Buddha in each painting are 200 representations of the goddess Tara, alternating between her green and white manifestations. The entire set of paintings likely depicted 1,000 Taras in all. These are the two most popular forms of Tara: Green, or Shyama Tara, who, along with the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, serves as a saviouress from the eight great perils of existence,

and White, or Sita Tara, the form of the goddess associated with longevity. Tara is recognized as a Bodhisattva, and as a fully-enlightened Buddha. She is also conflated with the goddess Prajnaparamita, the embodiment of enlightenment wisdom and the mother of all Buddhas.

It is not uncommon for sets of 1,000 Buddhas to be depicted in Tibetan art. This relates to the "Aryabhadra-kalpa-sutra" which proposes a time of 1,000 Buddhas. It was believed that the devotee who offers the 1,000 Buddhas receives more merit than from many other offerings, so they became a common subject in the arts. What is unusual is to find 1,000 Taras depicted instead. This is clearly making an allusion to the 1,000 Buddhas, and suggests a conflation of the two conceptions. Tara, here, is a Buddha. By definition, she is the source of Buddhas, so this set of paintings may also represent the mothers of the 1,000 Buddhas.

Bibliography

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

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