

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Two Paintings: Dorje Legpa ([Image](#)) and his Officer, Garba Nagpo ([Image](#))***

Thangka, painting

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

Eastern Tibet (Kham region)

Ca. 18th century

Karma Gadri style

Museum#: 97.280 &amp; 97.279

By Tom Suchan

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Dorje Legpa (Skt: Vajrasadhu) whose name means "Excellent or Accomplished Vajra" is held to be one of the highest ranking "oath-bound" guardian deities (Skt: Dharmapala) by the Nyingma "old" sect of Tibetan Buddhism (De Nebesky-Wojokowitz, 154). His chief officer and emanation Garba Nagpo, "The Black-Hued Blacksmith," is an equally important protective deity who appears in a number of paintings in the Rezk collection. By coincidence, the largest and smallest thangkas included in the present exhibition represent respectively, Dorje Legpa and Garba Nagpo. The varying sizes of these works is not indicative of their relative status but rather of differing functions within the ritual and devotional activities of Tibetan Buddhism. Despite its size when compared to other paintings in the exhibition, the painting of Dorje Legpa is actually not that unusual for images of protective deities. Large hanging tankas such as this are often displayed inside a special room of a monastery called the mGon khang "hall of the protectors" or are used to line the inner walls of prayer halls. In contrast, the smaller painting of Garba Nagpo was probably created as an item of personal devotion carried by hand or placed in a private shrine. Compared to the rather folkish style of the large painting, the smaller painting with its finely detailed miniature surface is perhaps the most elegantly painted image in the present exhibition.

Dorje Legpa is one of the native deities subdued by Padmasambhava and bound by oath to serve the Buddhist cause. Like other protective deities he has a variety of forms and is sometimes indistinguishable from his chief officer Garba Nagpo. According to the Nyingma tradition, he is one of four treasure guardians and resides in the South where he guards over the yellow treasure of gold (De Nebesky-Wojokowitz, 154) and appears at times as a guide to help others find hidden *dharma* teachings (T: gter ma). His abode is described in a manner similar to that depicted in this large thangka with a storm brewing behind a circle of desolate black mountains where a number of wild horses, yaks, and goats wandering about the desolate setting. Dorje Legpa is accompanied by seven fierce looking blue figures who are shown wildly flaying their limbs and dismembering corpses. These gruesome little figures probably represent nine brothers (T: Ma sangs spun dgu) who are part of Dorje Legpa's large retinue which also includes three hundred and sixty of his own brothers. Dorje Legpa's mount is a billy-goat with crossed horns that stares out directly at the viewer. This is an actual kind of goat native to Tibet called a Dam Chen Ra "Oath-bound Goat" which is sometimes stuffed and placed at the entrance to the halls of protectors (Lipton, 194). The *vajra* (T: rDo rJe) he holds above his head in his right hand is said to be made of meteoric iron and in his left hand he holds a string of prayer beads (Skt: mala, T: 'phreng wa) made of miniature skulls. Directly above Dorje Legpa is a small seated image of Padmasambhava. To Padmasambhava's sides are four unidentified monks in yellow

hats.

Not shown in the painting, but part of Dorje Legpa's retinue is Garba Nagpo (T: mGar ba nag po), "the dark-hued blacksmith," who is venerated by Tibetan blacksmiths as the protector of their craft. According to legend, Garba Nagpo was the son of the king of demons and became a craftsman and weapon maker. Blacksmithing is one of the low class occupations adopted by famous yogins to transmute mundane experience into the enlightened state of mind. The yogin like the blacksmith has to learn to control physical processes to achieve the desired end. The art of the blacksmith working metals at the forge to transform and purify them with fire can be likened to the process of Kundalini yoga where the spiritual heat generated internally by the yogin is used to arouse higher levels of consciousness. Garba Nagpo is himself portrayed as a blacksmith holding the tools of a smithy, in his proper left hand is a tiger-skin bellows and raised above his head in his proper right hand is a vajra hammer. The pumping of the bellows is a metaphor for yogic breath (Skt: pranayana) that flows through the psychic channels of consciousness in meditation. In some images of Garba Nagpo the tiger skin bellows is actually replaced with a bellows made with the skin of a yogin. The hammer is used to transform not only metal but also metaphorically the mind by pounding away the poisonous thoughts of desire, aversion, and ignorance. In many parts of Asia base metals were thought to have the inherent potential to become gold, the purist of metals. In Buddhism that inherent potential is analogous to the realization of the universally shared Buddha nature that is ever present but covered by impurities. The wildly blazing fire that engulfs Garba Nagpo and the goat he rides is the fire of the forge which purifies the mind just as metals are smelted of their impurities. Leaping from the flames and smoke are four ferocious little furry mammals. A number of animals are described as part of the train of Dorje Legpa and several of these animals, such as the wolf and the wild dog are associated with specific metals.

In the upper right portion of the painting which has suffered some water damage the figure of a seated Karmapa Lama is faintly recognizable by his black hat. This figure is probably the second Karmapa Karma Pakshi who is often accompanied by Garba Nagpo in his portraits. In this exhibition, Garba Nagpo appears underneath an image of the third Karmapa Lama Rang Jang Dorje (SAMA number 92.048) as a subsidiary protective figure at the bottom of his portrait.

Stylistically this work is an excellent example of the Karma Gadri school of painting. Characteristic of that school of painting is the use of unpainted background space and the use of Chinese inspired landscape elements. The small jewel like landscape complete with an old gnarled pine tree on top of cluster of precariously piled rocks behind the main figure is clearly derived from the Chinese blue-green landscape painting tradition. The small bird caught in mid air flight is however not a Chinese motif but one ultimately inspired from Persian miniature painting.

On the back of this thangka are red and brownish finger and hand marks of a Lama which were used to bless and vivify the work. The physical contact with a Lama is considered a great blessing. In Tibetan Buddhist art the ritual consecration of art works is important. Only after consecration can they serve as vessels for the deities they represent.

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