

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

Thangka, painting

Cotton support with opaque mineral pigments in waterbased (collagen) binder 29.75 x 45.0 inches

Central Tibet

Ca. 18th century

Museum #: 94.002

By Chaya Chandrasekhar

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Hayagriva or, "horse-necked one," is a primary emanation of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of absolute compassion. Avalokiteshvara's compassion manifests itself in various angry, energetic deities who serve as his acolytes, attending to the needs of afflicted devotees. Specifically, Hayagriva is the archetypal fierce, dynamic manifestation of Avalokiteshvara's undying compassion. The Bodhisattva's compassion transforms into a fierce energy that compels one to overcome internal obstacles and subdue outer hindrances (Rhie, Thurman, 189).

The most distinguishing characteristic of Hayagriva is the representation of a horse's head above his own. Frequently, as many as three horse's heads are depicted. This is particularly common in multiple-headed representations of the deity. The horse is significant for its neigh is believed to cut through false attachments, revealing the reality of enlightenment (Rhie, Thurman, 189).

In Tibet, Hayagriva is one of the primary *yidam*, or chosen meditational deities. Essentially, the *yidam* deities are visualization devices that force the realization of a devotee's own potential for religious attainment (Rhie, Thurman, 15). Thus, Hayagriva provides a means through which a practitioner recognizes his or her own innate altruistic compassion. Subsequently, this awareness leads the devotee towards the final religious goal.

Several forms of Hayagriva occur in Tibetan Buddhism. In the SAMA painting, [#94.002](#), he is represented as the Krodha Atiguhya or, "Angry Highest Secret" Hayagriva. He is depicted as a powerful, three-headed, paired-deity in union with his Prajna, or female counterpart. The characteristic neighing horse's head is visible in Hayagriva's hair, above his central crown. Each of his six arms hold specific attributes. In his upper right and left hands he holds an elephant goad and a noose respectively. In his lower right hand he holds a club. A sword is held in his lower left hand. He holds a lotus and a skull cup in his primary left and right hands while supporting his Prajna. Large meteoric iron wings expanding behind Hayagriva's arms suggest that, as Krodha Atiguhya, he possibly belongs to the Heruka, or fully enlightened peaceful/wrathful class of highly esoteric deities. Heruka figures define religious attainment through detachment from delusion and ignorance.

The jina Buddha Amitabha, the progenitor of Hayagriva, is depicted in the top center of the painting. Hayagriva is also associated with Padmasambhava, who is shown seated to the right of Buddha Amitabha. Vajrapani, the fierce protector and manifestation of energetic wisdom, is represented on the Buddha's far left. Four angry deities, probably members of Hayagriva's retinue, are depicted around

the central figure.

A bowl with offerings of the five senses is shown directly below Hayagriva. A figure riding on a white lion is represented on the proper right side of the offering bowl. He holds a sword in his right hand and possibly a noose in his left. He appears to be accompanied by four figures, possibly attendants, each riding on specific animal.

On the proper left side of the offering bowl is a representation of Rahula. Depicted as part human, part snake, his belly marked with a gaping face and his body covered with eyes, Rahula is the personification of the eclipse. To his left, is the great Dharma protector, Begse, literally, "hidden shirt of mail." He is identified by the flaming sword he brandishes in his raised right hand and the heart of a vanquished enemy in his left. Below his feet lie the carcass of a horse and human corpse.

Four dakini-type, female figures are represented, in pairs, on the far left and right sides of the composition. They hold specific attributes in their right hands and human entrails in each of their left. Although, on occasion, groups of dakinis accompany various forms of Hayagriva, the identification of this specific set is unclear.

The figure of a yellow-capped teacher in the top left corner of the painting initially suggests a Gelug sect attribution to the painting. However, the presence of Rahula, a characteristically Nyingma deity, at the bottom, suggests otherwise. The presence of Padmasambhava and Amitabha at the top, also indicate that the painting probably belonged to the Nyingma sect. The inclusion of the yellow-capped Gelug teacher was probably a reference to a specific lineage.

References:

Rhie, Marilyn and Robert A.F. Thurman. *Wisdom and Compassion*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1991.

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