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Thangka, painting

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

17.5 x 25.25 inches

Ca. 19th century

Museum #: 97.078

By Tom Suchan

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Yama is an ancient Vedic deity incorporated into the Tibetan Buddhist Pantheon as the judge of the dead and ruler of the Buddhist hells located in the southern hemisphere of the Mount Meru world system beneath the continent of Jambuidpa. His name comes from the root used in Vedic literature meaning "twin" and means "to restrain or bound." In Tibet Yama is usually called gShin rje, "Lord of Death" or Dam Can Chos rGyal, "The Pledge Bound Dharma-King." The later alludes to his conversion to Buddhism by Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, in his wrathful manifestation as Yamantaka "the Destroyer of Yama." There are three common forms of Yama that occur in Tibetan Buddhism which are called respectively the External, Internal, and Secret Yama. This painting depicts the External or Outer form (T: *phyi sgrub*) of Yama who is a Dharma protector invoked to protect devotees from mundane difficulties such as physical illness and hunger. He is the color blue and is shown in the characteristic fierce standing pose of a protective deity with a pot belly and erect penis. He has the head of a fierce bull with sharply pointed horns and protruding blood shot eyeballs. Yama stands on a blue bull with a fanged mouth widely agape. Underneath the bull a prostrate red human figure is being crushed by the weight of Yama and the bull. The bull is an ancient symbol in Indic religions that is associated with Yama and death, but also can symbolize procreation. This ambivalent symbolism is understood in the Buddhist context as the overcoming of death to create eternal life.

Yama is personified as a bull as a metaphor of the uncontrolled mind that one must learn to control to overcome death. In Yama's right hand he holds a club to smash obstacles and with his left hand he makes the threatening *tarjani mudra* to ward off difficulties and bound them with a snare that he usually carries. Clinging to his left side is his twin sister the red-colored Yamari or Yami, who offers him a blood filled skull-cup, representing the offering of the five senses.

In his role as lord of hell, Yama should not be confused with Western religious notions of the Devil as the embodiment of evil. Instead, Yama should be understood as a deity given a task within the greater Buddhist cause of the salvation of all living beings. In Buddhist symbolic terms the overcoming of death by terminating the cycle of rebirth is the ultimate goal and it is Yama who serves as a transformer in that process by embodying impermanence.

This painting is an excellent example of painting on a black ground (T: *nag thang*). Gold colored ink is used to outline the forms of the figures with red, blue, and orange color applied to give the forms of the figures a three dimensional appearance. Painting on a black ground (T. *Nag thang*) gained popularity in the eighteenth century and is usually reserved for images of the protective deities.

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