

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)**Ritual Bone Apron** ([Image](#))

Bone and various strings (mostly cotton)

29.5 x 16.5 inches (as displayed)

Various dates, Ca. 18th century?

Museum #: 91.001.003

By Natalie R. Marsh

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Bone aprons such as this ca. 18th century example in the SAMA collection were worn as ritual garments meant to vivify the practitioner or priest during Tantric ceremonial practices. The significance of wearing such ornamentation symbolizes one's own death and the necessary release of one's attachment to the human physical body in order to effectively pursue enlightenment. This is further reified in the use of human bones collected from chanel fields and carved into the beads shown. A set of six bone ornaments, including the apron, worn by certain Tantric deities, symbolize the six *paramitas*, or perfections, necessary for the attainment of enlightenment.¹

The full iconographic program of this damaged apron is unclear, though certain elements are identifiable. The third and fourth large carved plaques from the left along the waistband depict two standard dakinis with left hands in *vitarka mudra*, and holding a *kapala*, or a skull cup, in their right hands. In the second large plaque from the left a multi-armed esoteric Tantric deity is carved in relief. The small medallions interspersed with strands of plain beads represent lotuses; the crescent moon and sun, a symbol of the union of male and female ubiquitous in Tantric art; floral motifs; and two *apsaras*, one bearing a garland and the other carrying what may be a small bowl of sweets. In other published examples of this type of apron, the medallions would also depict the full set of the *astamangala*, the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism.

Since they were repeatedly worn in ritual pageants it is likely that these delicate pieces were frequently restrung and repaired with new beads and carved plaques. In fact, the style of the three largest central carved plaques at the waist, the uncommon arrangement of the figures, and the uneven beadwork of the net-like skirt, indicate that sections of a single apron were rearranged after having been broken or are combined portions from two or more separate aprons. The figure in the second plaque to the left, because he or she is a multi-armed Tantric deity, would more likely be flanked by generalized dakinis, rather than positioned on a single side of the lesser important goddesses. In addition, the lower segment of the plaque depicting the multi-armed deity is carved with a pattern that differs from the two dakini plaques, indicating the possibility of a different hand or the combining of plaques from different aprons. The small five-petaled lotus plaques that edge the apron also vary slightly in style.

Other published examples of bone aprons provide evidence that there is no known regularized structure to the number of plaques and tiers of medallions.²

Numerous examples of bone ornaments are worn by deities in the paintings and sculpture of the SAMA collection. See the Khadgadakini/Vajravarahi sculpture, [#97.132](#) ; the painting of Palden Lhamo, [# 91.001.018](#); the blue Gurgyi Gampo painting, [# 92.002A](#); and the 6-armed Mahakala painting, [# 93.010](#).

1 Huntington, John C., Leaves from the Bodhi Tree, 537.

2 Pal, P. Tibet: Tradition and Change, 170-171 and Pal, P. , 123-124,

References:

Huntington, John C. and Susan L. Huntington, Leaves from the Bodhi Tree, 1990.

Pal, Pratapaditya, Tibet: Tradition and Change, 1998.

Pal, Pratapaditya,

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