

Tantric Buddhist art from Nepal

The Buddhist deity Kalachakra, shown here with his consort Vishvamata, is a *yi-dam* or guardian deity. Every Buddhist monastery, family and individual in Nepal is assigned a protective deity by a Buddhist spiritual guide and teacher, or *lama*. Images of the *yi-dam*, which serve as a focus for worship, may be made in a wide variety of media and styles, including metal sculpture, as in this example, paintings, textiles, pressed clay tablets, dough and butter sculptures, and sand pictures. The image of the *yi-dam* may be carried by the devotee in a small portable container worn as a pendant or strapped to the body, or included in a domestic shrine within the home. Wealthy individuals may display more elaborate and costly images like this sculpture in a dedicated shrine room in their house. In addition, a devotee could commission a work like this as a gift for the local monastery, and thus accrue spiritual merit. The commissioned work would be worshipped within the monastery.

Kalachakra is a Sanskrit word meaning 'wheel or cycle of time'. The Kalachakra Tantra is a Buddhist scripture believed to have originated in north-west India in the tenth century. Kalachakra is the main deity of the *tantra*, and a figural representation or personification of the concept of the cycles of time as understood in Tibetan Buddhism and presented in the Kalachakra Tantra text.¹

Kalachakra is worshipped in Tibet, Nepal, and Mongolia, and is also known as Chag-un Kurde (Mongolian) and Dus-'Khor (Tibetan). This sculpture was made in Nepal, where both Hinduism and Buddhism are practised. *Yi-dam* deities are almost invariably depicted with their consorts in a sexual embrace, as in this example. The image, known as *yab-yum* or mother–father, represents the union of wisdom (female) and compassion (male). It is not considered an erotic image, but is intended to illustrate that both knowledge and empathy are necessary for enlightenment, a true understanding of reality.

The main figures of the sculpture were cast in one piece using the 'lost wax' process. In this process each image produced is unique. The process includes four steps:

1. A wax model is first created with all details rendered precisely as they will appear in the final metal sculpture.
2. A clay mould is carefully built up over the wax form in layers of liquid clay and then clay paste. When the mould is finished holes are bored in the base so that wax rods may be inserted that are joined to the wax form. They allow for the molten metal to be poured into the mould and as an avenue for displaced air to escape so that no defects from air bubbles appear on the surface of the cooled metal statue.
3. The mould is fired in a kiln with the base down so that the wax can run out (hence the term 'lost wax'). Meanwhile the metal, usually a mixture of copper, brass and lead, is melted in the kiln. When the metal is liquid, it is poured into the mould through the holes in the base.
4. After cooling, the mould is chipped from the metal sculpture which is repaired if necessary, then filed and polished.

NEPALESE

Kalachakra and Vishvamata

17th century, Nepal

gilt-bronze, turquoise, garnet, metallic

gilding, pigment

32.2 x 25.0 x 18.9 cm (overall)

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¹ The tantra describes a system of external, internal and alternative cycles. The external ones deal with the motion of the planets through the heavens and various cycles or divisions of time measured by them in terms of years, months, days, and so forth. The alternative cycles consist of the meditation practices described in the tantra system involving the deity Kalachakra, which are used to overcome the influence of uncontrollably recurring external and internal situations (*samsara*) in order to realise one's full potential for the benefit of all.

