

Tantric Buddhist art from Nepal

see DVD for additional material

चिहान
chihan
cemetery

आगो
aago
fire

आंखाहरु
ankha
eyes

This painting on cloth depicts the Buddhist deity Mahasamvara (Great Samvara) with his consort or female counterpart (*shakti*), Vajravarahi.¹ Mahasamvara is a type of Buddhist deity known as a *yi-dam*, or guardian, whose role is to protect a devotee against evil. The protection of a special *yi-dam* is requested by a *lama* (Buddhist teacher) on behalf of himself or a layman. The *yi-dam*'s guardianship can be requested for a lifetime or for a special event or undertaking. It is considered that the security thus evoked is more effective if the deity is worshipped in the form in which he is accompanied by his consort or *shakti*, as the *shakti*'s energy will activate the powers of the god.

The painting was made as a focus for meditation. When a lama wished to place himself under the protection of a particular deity he prepared by meditating on an image of the god, in the hope that the deity would accept the guardianship and reveal himself to the *lama*. The image of the deity could take many forms, including a sculpture, painting or woven or appliquéd textile. However, for the deity to be successfully evoked, the correct details must be depicted. Hence the numerous iconographic details illustrated in this image are all relevant to the use of the image, as they correctly identify Mahasamvara and Vajravarahi, and reveal the nature of the god.

The multiplicity of the god's heads and arms reveal his tantric nature, as does the flaming halo behind him and his blue-green colour.² The deity has numerous arms, each of which holds an implement that refers to the god's actions and strengths. In his upper hands he holds the edge of a flayed elephant skin, which is draped behind his back and signifies the control exercised over the wild forces of nature by Buddhist wisdom.³ In his main hands he holds the bell (signifying the female, wisdom and reason) and *vajra* (the main symbol of Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism, which signifies the male, spiritual power and compassion). The god has five layers of four heads; the central head is blue, the right head is white, the left head is green, and the head at the back, shown here on the right, is red. Mahasamvara wears a garland of skulls, which symbolises his triumph over evil forces. He and his consort are situated at the centre of a mandala (a cosmic diagram). The eight segments around them are eight great cemeteries, symbolic ideal places that represent the places where one is 'dead' to the illusions of life, fame, gain, sex, money etc. The ring of flames is a secondary ring of the mandala.

NEPALESE
Mahasamvara and Vajravarahi
18th century, Nepal
pigments and gold paint on linen
90.5 x 80.7 cm
Presented through The Art Foundation of
Victoria by Sir James Plimsoll AC CBE,
Governor, 1982 (AS25-1982)

- ¹ For an explanation of *shakti* see the entry on *linga* and Shiva worship.
- ² Tantric is a term used to describe a type of Hindu and Buddhist belief and practice based on mystical Indian texts (*tantra*) dating from around the seventh century AD. It is characterised by the use of *mantra* (syllables, words or phrases recited as a form of meditation and usually associated with a particular deity), meditation, yoga and ritual, some of which may be only accessible to initiates. Tantra is particularly important in Tibetan Buddhism, also known as Vajrayana Buddhism.
- ³ The flayed skins of elephants, tigers and other wild animals are often depicted in Himalayan art as deities' garments or offerings to deities. The skins indicate forces of nature that Buddhist wisdom can overcome, and may be interpreted as external evils or inner weaknesses.

