

GATEWAY TO HIMALAYAN ART

LOOKING GUIDE

Use this guide to help you identify common symbols and meanings in Himalayan art.

To learn more about the art and cultures of the Himalayas, visit RubinMuseum.org/PHA.



FIGURES



BUDDHAS

Buddhas, or “awakened beings,” can be identified by a cranial protuberance, elongated earlobes and a tuft of hair between their eyebrows. Siddhartha Gautama, often referred to as the Buddha or Buddha Shakyamuni, is the historical Buddha.



BODHISATTVAS

Bodhisattvas are persons who aspire to attain enlightenment and help others achieve it. They can be male or female and are portrayed adorned with crowns and jewelry.

HUMANS

Himalayan art not only depicts deities but also portraits of accomplished religious teachers (lamas), the Buddha’s original disciples (arhats), and spiritually accomplished tantric masters (mahasiddhas).



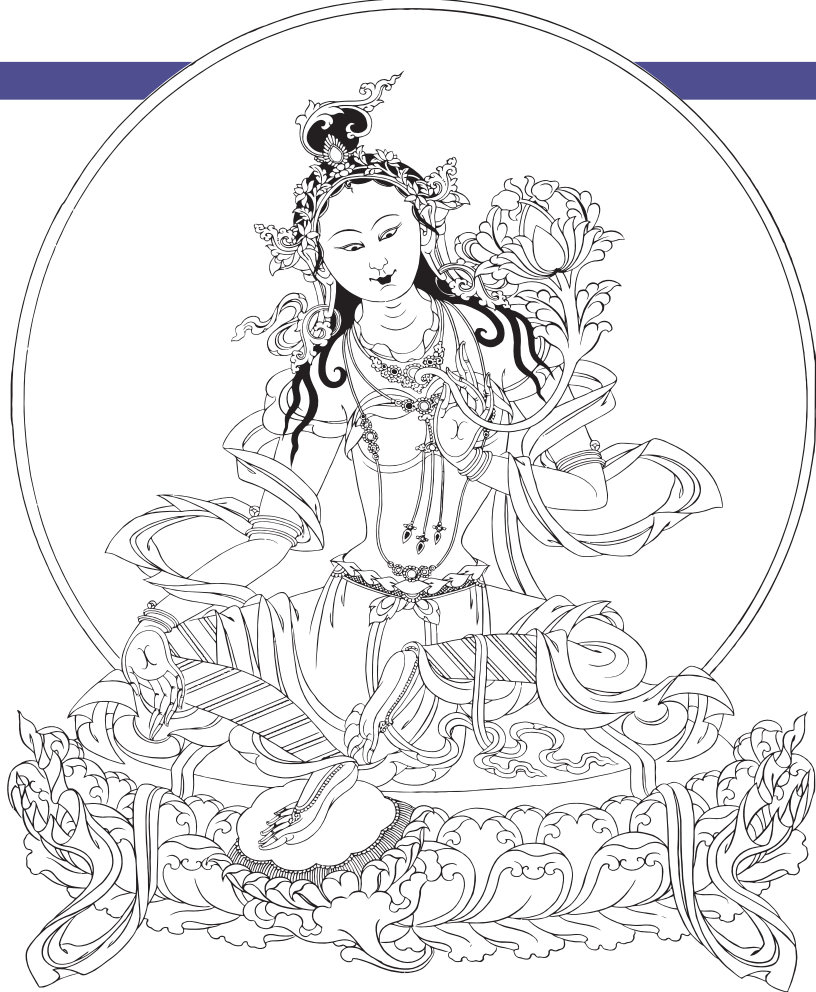
WRATHFUL DEITIES

Recognized by flaming hair, bulging eyes, fangs, and garlands of severed heads, these deities remove obstacles and serve as protectors of Buddhist teachings.



TANTRIC DEITIES

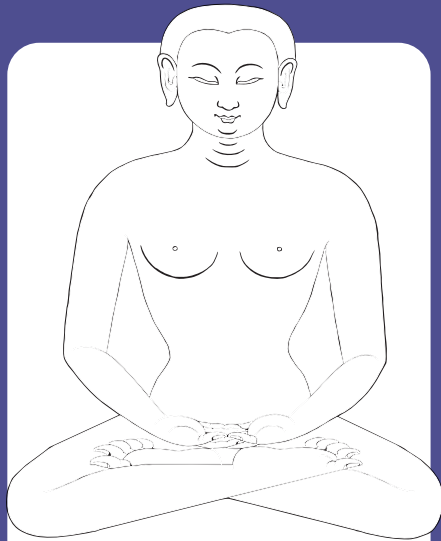
Numerous forms of deities are described in religious texts called tantras. These deities personify various enlightened qualities and can have many heads, arms, and legs, which symbolize their many abilities. Often depicted as pairs, they represent a union of wisdom and method, which combined, lead to awakening.



FEMALE DEITIES

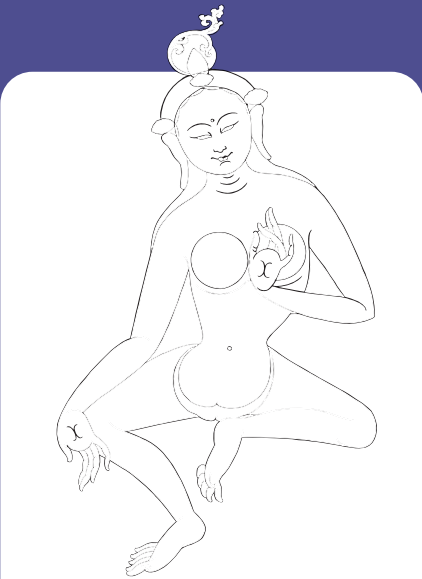
Bodhisattvas and tantric deities can be depicted in female form. Just like their male counterparts they embody enlightened qualities and can be both peaceful and wrathful in appearance.

POSTURES



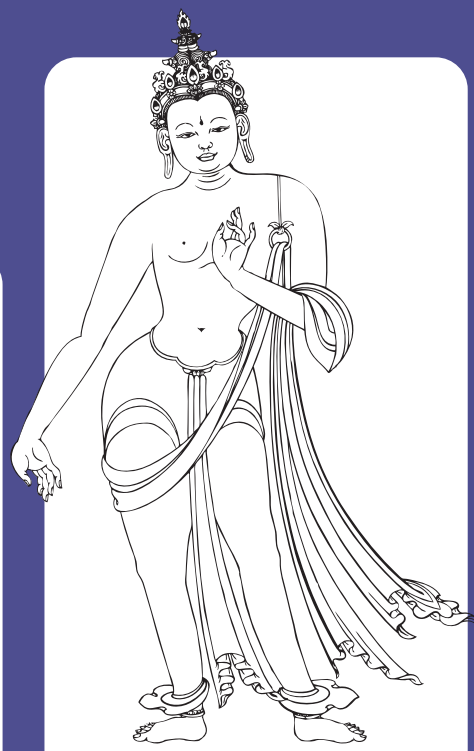
LOTUS

Also known as vajra position, this posture is associated with meditation.



ROYAL EASE

This relaxed posture is commonly associated with regal leisure.



STANDING

This posture features a triple-bend of the body at the knee, hip, and waist.

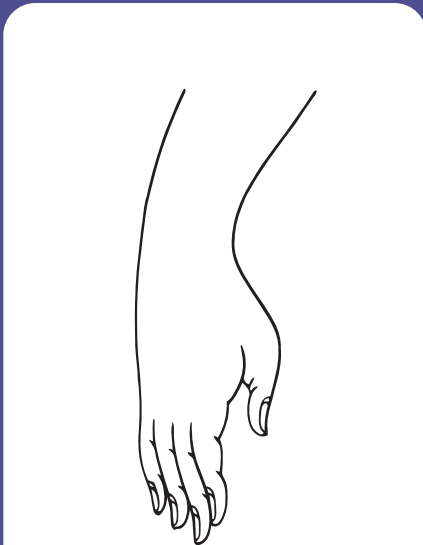


ARCHER/HUNTER'S STANCE



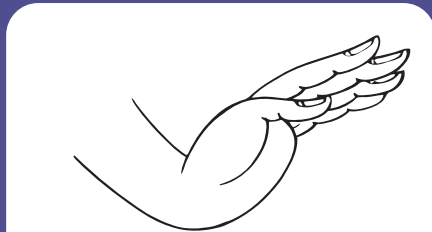
DANCING

GESTURES

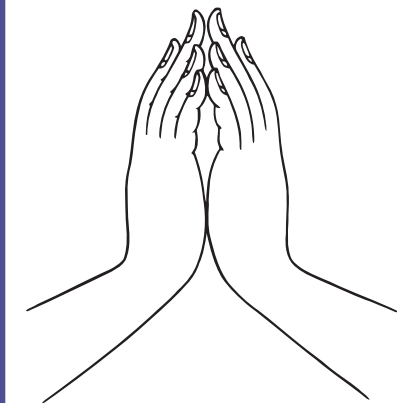


TOUCHING THE EARTH

This is the gesture of the Buddha calling the earth to witness his awakening.



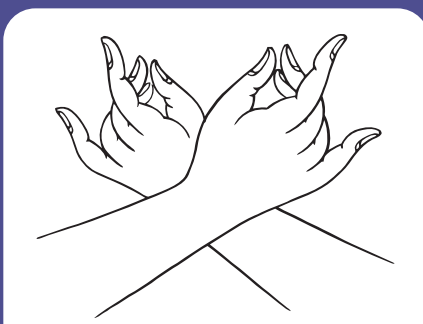
DO NOT FEAR (PROTECTION)



PRAYER (REVERENCE)

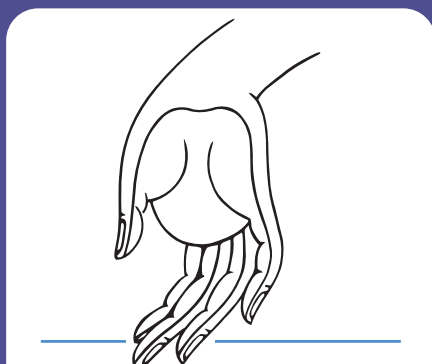


CONTEMPLATION



TANTRIC UNITY

This gesture is that of embracing a consort and is symbolic of bringing together two aspects of enlightenment: wisdom and method.



GRANTING WISHES AND BLESSINGS

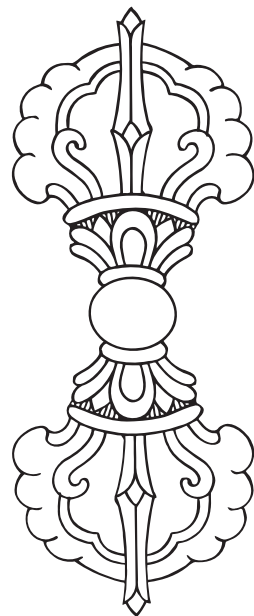
The right hand is extended in a giving gesture.



TEACHING

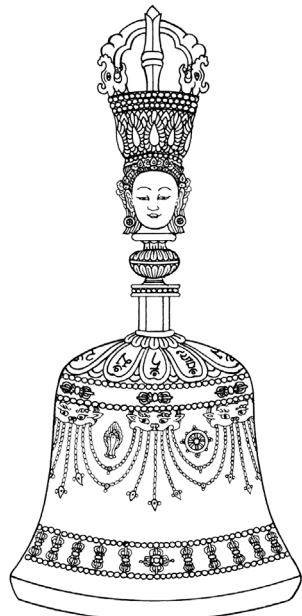
The hands form the shape of a wheel, symbolizing the "turning of the wheel of dharma," a reference to teaching the Buddha's doctrine.

RITUAL IMPLEMENTS



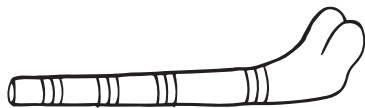
VAJRA

A *vajra* is a ritual scepter used in tantric practices and an attribute of tantric masters and deities. It generally symbolizes method, the male aspect of enlightenment.



BELL

A bell is often paired with the vajra and is another implement used in tantric practices and an attribute of tantric masters and deities. It generally symbolizes wisdom, the feminine aspect of enlightenment, and its ring is said to be the sound of emptiness.



THIGHBONE TRUMPET

This instrument is used in tantric rituals performed in charnel, or funerary, grounds and is played as an offering to wrathful deities. Its sound is said to be pleasing to wrathful deities but terrifying to evil spirits.

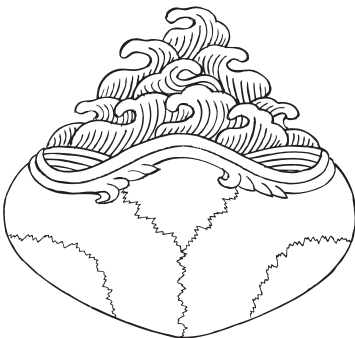
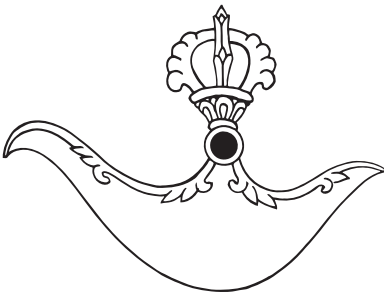


THREE-BLADED DAGGER

This implement is used in tantric rituals and is also an attribute of wrathful deities. It symbolizes cutting through ignorance, desire, and hatred, the three “root poisons” that perpetuate the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

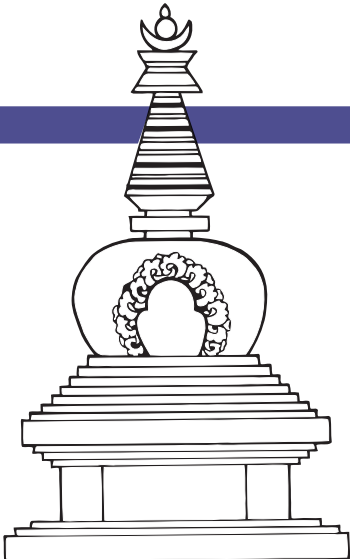
CURVED KNIFE

This weapon is an attribute of tantric deities and is usually paired with a skull cup. When held by female deities it symbolizes wisdom’s destruction of all obstacles to enlightenment. When held by male deities it represents the method aspect of enlightenment.



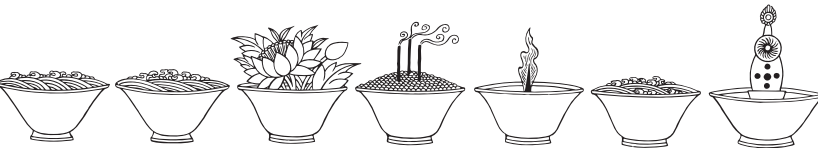
SKULL CUP

A skull cup is an attribute of tantric deities and is usually paired with a curved knife. It can symbolize a mind filled with the bliss of realizing the true nature of reality.



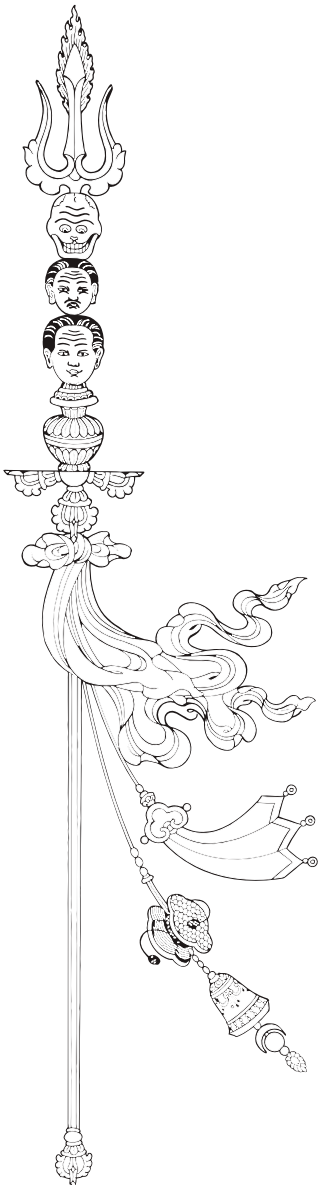
STUPA

Stupas were originally burial mounds housing relics of the Buddha. They symbolize the “mind of the buddha” attained at complete awakening.



SEVEN OFFERINGS

These seven offerings are symbolic representations of the seven welcoming gifts given to guests in ancient India. They are presented to deities and can include water, flowers, incense, light, perfume, food, and music.

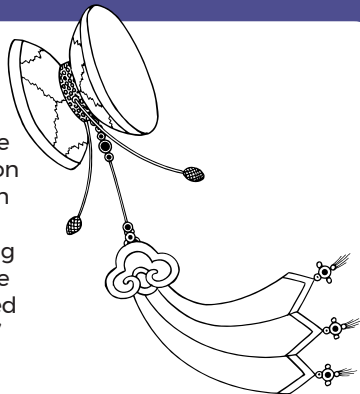


TANTRIC STAFF

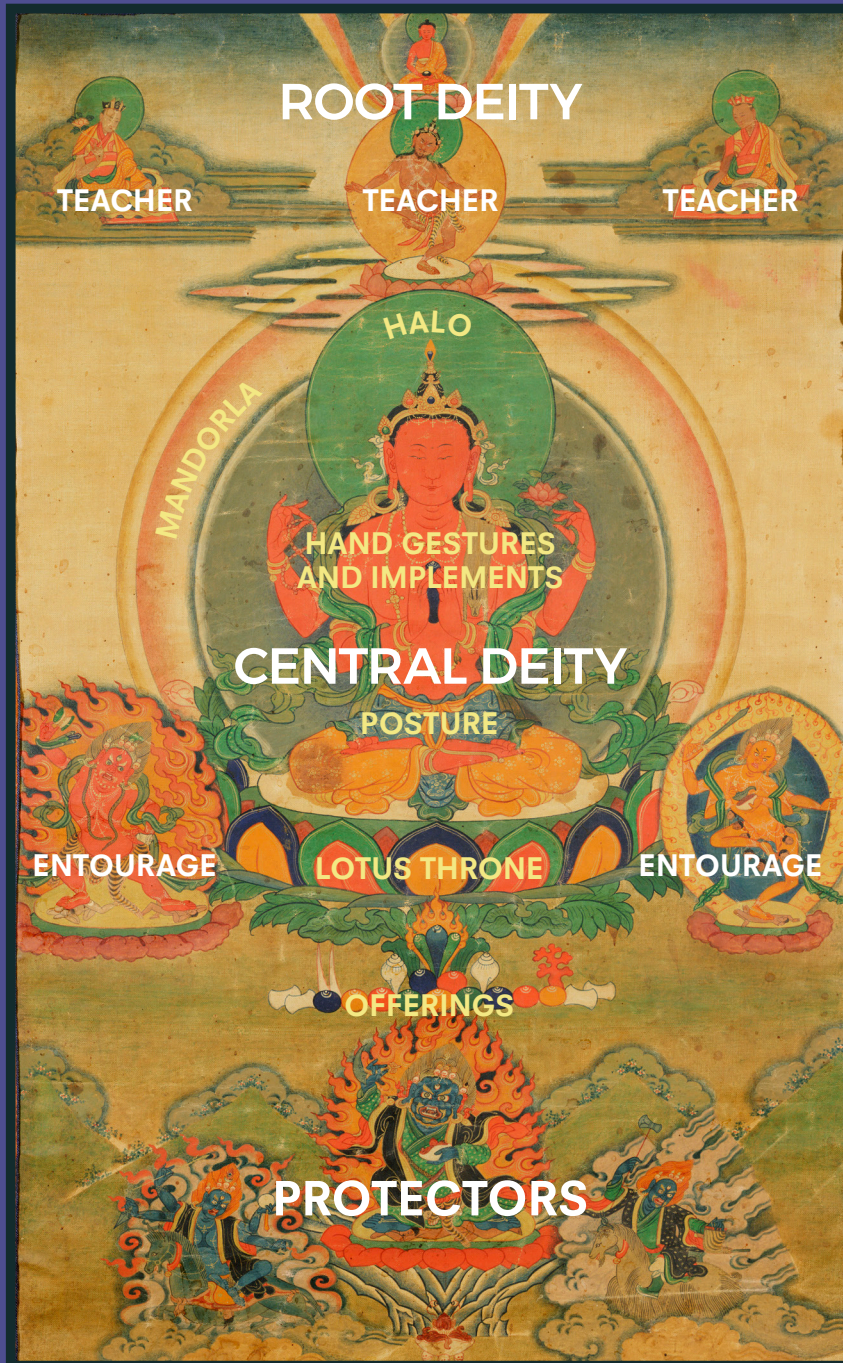
An attribute of tantric deities, this staff represents the union of the two aspects of enlightenment. When held by a male deity it symbolizes his female consort as wisdom, and when held by a female deity it represents her male consort as method.

HAND DRUM

An implement used in tantric practices, the two halves of this drum symbolize the union of the two aspects of enlightenment. When paired with a bell, it represents the male aspect of enlightenment, and its drumming is the sound of the bliss of realizing the true nature of reality. Large hand drums are used in the Tibetan practice of “cutting the ego.” Their sound represents impermanence.



COMPOSITION AND STRUCTURE OF A PAINTING



Tibetan hanging scrolls (thangkas) typically focus on a central figure, representative of a particular teaching, and the various associated teachers, deities, etc. All of the figures in a painting are presented in a symbolic hierarchy of position and scale.

The **central deity** is the main figure of the painting and is much larger than the others.

The **halo** and **mandorla**, or the body halo, represent the deity's awakened radiance.

Postures are key forms of expression associated with specific deities, moments in their lives, and aspects of religious practice.

Hand gestures are modes of self-expression that demonstrate specific qualities associated with the figure. Here two of the bodhisattva's four hands hold implements: a jewel, lotus, and prayer beads.

Implements are objects and symbolic attributes associated with the central deity.

The **entourage** are attendants such as bodhisattvas and tantric deities associated with the central deity.

In the **Lotus Throne**, the lotus symbolizes purity and enlightenment.

Offerings are acts of worship and gifts made to the central deity.

The **Protectors** of the teaching lineage are found in the lower register of the painting. These protectors are often wrathful deities.

Avalokiteshvara; Kham region, eastern Tibet; 19th century; pigments on cloth; 12 x 19 1/2 in.; Rubin Museum of Art; gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin; C2006.66.359 (HAR 790)

Organized by the Rubin Museum of Art, *Gateway to Himalayan Art* is a traveling exhibition designed to illuminate Himalayan, Tibetan, and Inner Asian art and cultures. The exhibition is one component of a three-part initiative that includes the publication *Himalayan Art in 108 Objects* and a digital platform featuring rich video content, an interactive map, and more. Visit RubinMuseum.org/PHA.

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