Re-imagining a Revolutionary Tibetan Art School: An Exceptional Dancing Hevajra with Consort Nairātmyā

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This inquiry examines a thangka (Fig. 1 and 2)[1] in a private collection in Germany,[2] formerly owned by the Austrian mountaineer, civil engineer and Tibet-explorer Peter Aufschnaiter.[3] The artwork is exceptional, both for its high quality of craftsmanship and its religious-artistic context presenting a complex iconographic program rooted in esoteric teachings and meditative practices. It is rendered with exceptional refinement, sense of variation and intricate detail. It is executed in bright pigments with pastel tones, subtly enhanced by delicate gold highlights. The style and iconography of this hardly studied object as well as its approach towards landscape and portraiture align with a major artistic tradition, associated with the Sa skya pa tradition, ultimately derived from one of the foremost Tibetan master artists active in fifteenth-century Central Tibet. The primary

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1 This object has been studied by the author within the framework of the FWF Research Project P35249-G (2022–2026) "The scientific Tibet legacy of Peter Aufschnaiter," directed by Christian Jahoda at the Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna; https://www.oeaw.ac.at/en/isa/research/research-areas-at-isa/tibet-mongolia-central-asia-and-tibetan-speaking-himalaya-regions/the-scientific-tibet-legacy-of-peter-aufschnaiter (last access 1 Dec. 2025).

There are no words to express my gratitude for Guntram's flawless, exemplary scholarly model and for his inspiration and support during the pivotal phases of academic work undertaken by many students and researchers, including myself.

2 At some point (exact date unknown), Peter Aufschnaiter brought the thangka to the current owner. It hung in the room used by Peter Aufschnaiter above the bed, so it was apparently very important to him. There used to be a protective silk covering, which was damaged during transport and subsequently removed.

The dimensions with frame are: width 67 cm (top), 77 cm (bottom); length: 115 cm; painting: 58 x 45 cm; pigments on cloth, most probably original frame of silk brocade.

3 Peter Aufschnaiter lived in Tibet (1944–1952) and, with the exception of an employment in the Military Survey Department at the Indian Army Headquarters from January 1, 1953, to July 31, 1956, he lived in Nepal and worked in Tibetan-speaking regions of Nepal (1952–1971). See the contribution by C. Jahoda, C. Aufschnaiter and Tsering Drongshar in this volume.

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Fig. 1 – Hevajra thangka (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).

goal is to analyze, for the first time, the historical, social, and ritual background of this sacred artwork—together with an emphasis of the visual expressions of female agency and men's and women's body and



Fig. 2 – Dākinī *Śabarī, white, holding monk and a monk's staff, detail of Hevajra thangka (Fig. 1) (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).*

corporeality—and to attempt an identification of the transmission lineage of the religious masters, which may allow for a preliminary dating.[4]

The thangka features as main deity the dancing Śrī Hevajra (Tib. dPal Kye'i rdo rje), a prominent Buddhist meditational deity (Skt. *iṣṭadevatā*, Tib. *yidam*)[5] and the principal deity of the tantra named after him, the *Hevajratantra* (Fig. 1, 3 and 4).

Hevajra is shown with his consort (Skt. *śakti*, Tib. *yum)*, the enlightened goddess Vajra Nairātmyā (Tib. rDo rje bDag med ma) accompanied by eight *ḍākinīs* arranged around them. Hevajra is influential throughout India and Southeast Asia, with the Hevajra

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4 I am grateful to Christian Jahoda, Bernadette Broeskamp, Ebba Koch, Valentina Ferracioli, and Tsering Drongshar for their support and assistance in the preparation of this paper.

5 A *yidam (iṣṭadevatā*) can be almost any deity that is classified in Tantric literature of Vajrayāna Buddhism as a 'wisdom deity' meaning it is an enlightened deity or an emanation of an enlightened deity, i.e. a Buddha. It is a chosen, or personal meditational deity and it presents a practitioner's particular characteristic expression of buddha-nature which is visualized (see Trungpa 1975: 20f.). In practice, these deities are generally selected from the inventory of principal meditation practices common to a particular spiritual lineage or tradition.

See also examples in the LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum), M.70.1.4 (https://collections.lacma.org/node/251195) and M.85.221 (https://collections.lacma.org/node/236885).



Fig. 3 – Hevajra thangka (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).



Fig. 4 – Hevajra thangka, diagram (C. Kalantari, in cooperation with Tsering Drongshar, 2025).

Tantra[6]—likely composed in India around the 8th–10th century—[7] forming one of the basic texts of two major Tibetan Buddhist schools, Sa skya pa and bKa' brgyud pa. This tantra, describing his iconography, mantras, and meditation practices, encompasses both rigorous intellectual training and the experiential cultivation of advanced meditation techniques. The tantric deity in this image is depicted according to the Sa skya lineage and it represents the utmost meditative practice of this tradition. The latter is also denominated as Lam 'bras (meaning "The Path and Its Fruit") presenting a complete path to enlightenment that unifies sutra and tantra, with a strong focus on yogic practice and experiential realization.

In the Anuttara Yoga classification of Tantric Vajrayāna Buddhism the divine couple represents the union of wisdom and compassion,

6 Among others source texts of Hevajra, Toh 417 (sDe dge *bKa' 'gyur*), the *Hevajratantra* (*Kye'i rdo rje rgyud*) can be cited. See also Himalayan Art Resources (https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=6493; last access 2 Dec 2025) for a list of Hevajra source texts.

7 In this work on the *Hevajratantra*, Snellgrove (1959) presents a full translation and commentary of this and other tantric texts of this class as an expression of esoteric ritual and meditative practice. See also Linrothe 1999.

often depicted in *yab-yum* posture (male-female union).[8] Within Mahāyāna philosophical discourse, the dynamic interplay and mutual interdependence of complementary principles of wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) is regarded as essential for the realization of enlightenment (*bodhicitta*). In Tantric Buddhism, wisdom and compassion are symbolically reconceived as feminine and masculine principles, whose confluence is depicted through the iconography of sexual union, serving as a visual metaphor for Tantric realization.[9]

In the prominent position in the centre of the uppermost registers is depicted the Ādibuddha Vajradhara (rDo rje 'chang), revered in the Tibetan Buddhist schools of the later historical period as the primordial source of their tantric doctrines and ritual practices. He is flanked by accomplished masters and Sa skya hierarchs, representing the lineage of transmission. The last lama in the lineage provides a terminus post quem and suggests a tentative dating of the scroll painting to the 19th century, which also conforms with the art historical evidence. In a prominent position in this lineage of highly revered teachers is also the Indian *mahāsiddha* Virūpa. This famous Indian yogin came to be regarded as an authoritative source for particular Buddhist esoteric teachings in Tibet. Moreover, Virūpa is regarded as a principal holder of the Hevajra and Lam 'bras lineages (Sa skya school's principal teaching).

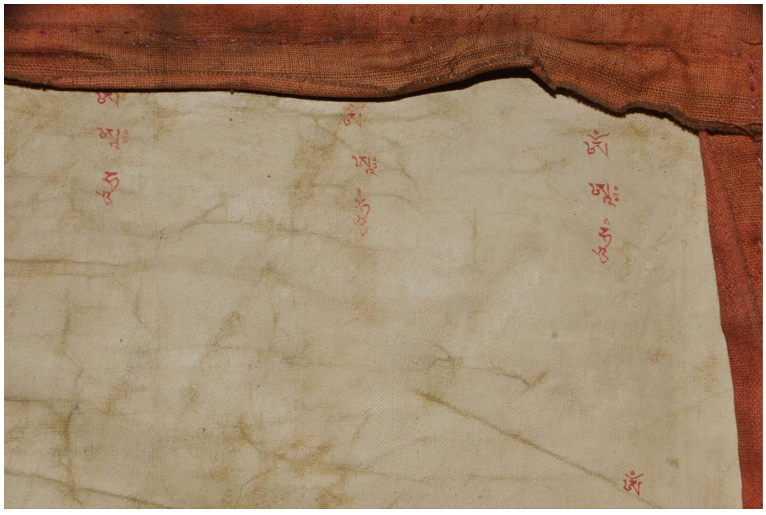


Fig. 5 – Hevajra thangka, reverse, detail (photo – C. Kalantari, 2024).

[8] See also examples in the LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum), M.70.1.4 and M.85.221.

[9] Broeskamp, in press.

On the reverse are inscriptions (Fig. 5). These scripts—corresponding the positions of figures on the front side—are practically identical representing the seed syllables ཨོཾ ཨཱཿ ཧཱུྃ (Skt. *oṃ āḥ hūṃ*), which stand for the three vajras of body, speech, and mind and adorn the forehead, throat, and heart of all Vajrayāna deities.[10]

Description and interpretation

The heroic figure of Śrī Hevajra (Fig. 1, 4 and 6) is depicted in a vivid posture, as a semi-wrathful deity with a body blue in color, possessing eight faces, sixteen arms, and four legs. The main, central face is blue (adorned with a *viśvavajra,* positioned in the centre of the main diadem).[11] The right face is white, the left red, and the upper face smoky-grey. The remaining four faces—two on either side—are grey in color. Each face has three eyes and displays four bared fangs, with orange-red hair flowing upward. Crowns of five dry human skulls adorn each head, and around the neck hangs a garland of fifty freshly severed heads; each has an individual physiognomy.

His first two arms are crossed in front of his chest in the gesture of union (*prajñā liṅganābhinaya mudrā)* symbolic of his non-dual unity with his female aspect, Nairātmyā, thereby also signifying the transcendence of dualistic distinctions and the attainment of supreme bliss (*mahā-sukha*), the state identified with perfect enlightenment.

The sixteen hands of Hevajra each hold a skull cup. The scull cup in his first right hand contains a white elephant; in that of



Fig. 6 – Hevajra, central deity (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).

[10] The letters are arranged vertically and there is no *tseg* (the dot marking syllables) anywhere.

[11] In Tantric Buddhism the *vajra* is both a weapon and the supreme symbol that visually represents this unique form of Indian Buddhism, the Vajrayāna Buddhism.

his first left hand is a human with yellow complexion adorned with a crown. These two hands embrace the consort (*prajñā*), who is also blue in color. In the second right hand is a blue horse; in the third, a donkey; the fourth holds a yellow bull; the fifth, a grey camel; the sixth, a red man; the seventh, a blue *śarabha* (a mythical beast); and the eighth, a light-blue cat. Then we see the next hands Indian *dikpāla*s (directional deities in the Hindu pantheon): In the second left hand is the white God of Water (Varuṇa); the third holds the red God of Fire (Agni); the fourth, the green God of Air (Vāyu); the fifth, the white God of the Moon (Candra); the sixth, the red God of the Sun (Sūrya); the seventh, the blue Yama, Lord of Death; and the eighth, the yellow Holder of Wealth (Kubera).

Hevajra stands with his consort on a lotus pedestal and tramples with his two right legs on forms of the main Hindu gods, Brahmā, Indra, Śiva, and Viṣṇu; the deities are also shown in the landscape background, as will be discussed below.

Concerning the dynamic bodily expression and stance of the deity, the two left legs are drawn up in a classic dancing posture. This form is considered to have passed down orally from the *mahāsiddha* Virūpa through the Sa skya lineage of teaching for the practices of Hevajra. The terminology in descriptions varies. The Sanskrit term is for the dance posture (*nṛtya*) is *ardhaparyaṅka-nṛtya,* or *half paryaṅka*, meaning "half cross-legged or half bent," thereby one leg is raised above the ground. A definition that can be found is: "Dancing in half paryaṅka, is a standing posture, where one leg is lifted in *ardhaparyaṅka*, and the other is on the ground, symbolic of a joyous and passionate Buddha nature".[12]

Ngag dbang legs pa (1867–1941)[13] describes the dance position of Hevajra in a different way: "… the two right legs are extended, on the thighs the toes of the two folded left legs are pressing in the half-[*vajra*] posture[14] in a dancing manner; possessing the nine sentiments of dancing: grace, strength and ugliness; laughter, ferocity and frightful; compassion, fury and peace." (Watt 2020).

From this debate emerges the need for a deeper examination of the interrelations between classical Indian religious concepts (beyond Buddhism) and Tibetan visual and textual representations of dance. Investigating how these traditions intersect with culturally recognized

[12] See wisdomlib.org/ardhaparyanka (last accessed on 1 December 2025).

[13] See treasuryoflives.org/biographies/Gaton-Ngawang-Lekpa (last accessed on 2 December 2025).

[14] *Vajra* posture usually means seated with the left leg and foot, sole up, placed on the right thigh and the right leg and foot placed on the left thigh. In Indian Yoga systems this posture is called *padmāsana*—'lotus posture'—however in Buddhism this is known as *vajrāsana*, or '*vajra* posture.'

non-Buddhist forms remains an important and still largely unmet scholarly desideratum.

Hevajra is shown in union with his consort Vajra Nairātmyā, representing the realization of no-self (Fig. 6). She is a fully enlightened goddess and a meditational deity representing the wisdom (*prajñā*) counterpart to Hevajra compassion (*karuṇā*). She is central to the *Hevajratantra* and is said to have directly transmitted liberative teachings of this tantra to the Indian *mahāsiddha* Virūpa, depicted in the uppermost zone of the scroll painting, as mentioned. She embodies a complex and multifaceted concept of the feminine in Indian and Tibetan tantric traditions that varies according to religion and region. In the tantric tradition of Buddhism, she is considered a chief-*ḍākinī* (Tib. *mkha' 'gro ma*), that generally can be understood as a class of female deities who embody wisdom and dynamic, transformative energy.[15] The name is derived from the Sanskrit root *di-* ("to fly"), and thus the *ḍākinī* (*mkha' 'gro ma*) is interpreted as a "sky-goer" or "space-traveler" (Beer 1999: 261).[16] In Tibetan art, *ḍākinīs* are depicted as powerful, often fierce, nude or semi-nude figures dancing in dynamic postures. Beer (*ibid*.) has put it as follows: "The metaphorical term 'space-traveller', means one who is immersed (a traveller) in the realisation of emptiness (space)."

Her body is rendered in a slightly darker shade of blue. She is naked adorned only by jewelry around her hips. She has one face, two hands, and three eyes, with orange-red hair falling down her shoulders. In her right hand she holds a curved knife (*karttikā*),[17] while her left arm embraces the father. She wears a crown and a necklace of dry human skulls. Her left leg is extended, and the right leg is drawn up around Hevajra in close embrace and mirroring and complementing the dance posture of the male deity. They move in complete synchrony. Her dance posture also represents a form of *ardhaparyaṅka-nṛtyā*, but standing on her left leg, typical of *ḍākinīs*.

Together they stand in the centre of a blazing fire of pristine awareness, symbolising the radiance of wisdom and the complete purification of obscuration. Above the central couple, deities dwelling in the clouds pour riches from vases onto the main deities, while others hold honorific parasols above them.

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15 She can also be shown as a single dancing figure (see LACMA, M.85.221) or seldom sitting alone in relaxed posture on a corpse atop a double lotus base (LACMA, M.70.1.4; https://collections.lacma.org/node/236885).

16 See also Hermann-Pfandt 1992.

17 In Tibetan Buddhism, the *karttika*, the curved knife or ritual chopper, symbolizes the destruction of all negative forces, and the cutting away of the veils which arise as obscurations to liberation and to the knowledge of emptiness (Beer 1999: 261).

Surrounding the main deities are the Eight *ḍākinīs*—structuring a kind of mandala—representing directions or energies surrounding the central deity (Figs. 2, 7, and 29). Each is depicted in different colours. They appear in a semi-ferocious aspect, with dishevelled, upraised hair. They move through dance postures; these dynamic postures are infused with erotic, sensual energy. The dance expresses an aspect of the *ḍākinī* as the female embodiment of enlightened energy, often associated with wisdom, transformation, and liberated activity.[18]



Fig. 7 – Hevajra thangka, ḍākinī *Caṇḍālī, grey, holding a wheel and a plough (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).*

With the left leg stretched out and the right leg bent and lifted in a dance-like pose, drawn in toward the body, they stand in the middle of a blazing fire of pristine awareness. Each of them is depicted on a lotus pedestal and stomping on a corpse, symbolizing overcoming ego.

Like Hevajra's and Nairātmyā's posture, their dance isn't just aesthetic but symbolic, conveying spiritual qualities through movement, gesture, and *rasa* (sentiment).[19] The usual Sanskrit term for

[18] Tibetan texts (see Jamgön Kongtrul 2003) and iconographic traditions support the idea that the dynamic forms of deities and *ḍākinīs* symbolise the impermanence of phenomena and serve as tools to help practitioners transcend attachment and dualistic thinking.

[19] In Indian aesthetics, as defined in the *Nāṭyaśāstra,* the two core concepts are *rasa* referring to the aesthetic and emotional experience evoked in the viewer (reader, listener, or spectator) by a work of art and *karaṇa*, which animates pose to movement (Ferracioli, personal communication).

the posture is half *paryaṅka* (*ardhaparyaṅka-nṛtyā*), meaning "half-bent", the most common posture for *ḍākinīs*.[20] The position has also been read as half-lotus posture (*ardhapadmāsana*—in Buddhism known as half *vajra*-posture—with a single foot showing the lotus posture/bent horizontally, the other pendant). However, this posture is usually used for seated deities.

The graceful and flowing dance posture can be described as follows: comparable with Nairātmyā, the left leg is angled and supports the weight of the drawn-up right leg bent toward the body (the bouncing of the dynamic is almost palpable). The hips and torso are twisted to create a counterbalance to the position of the legs, forming a dynamic S-shape (see also an offering goddess Gītā, playing her *vīṇā*, Tholing, Red Temple; Fig. 8). The arms are extended to the sides to balance the posture; each hand holds an object.



Fig. 8 – Goddess Gītā, playing her vīṇā, *Tholing, Red Temple (photo: J. Poncar 1993/WHAV JP93 43,8).*

Hevajra's *ḍākinīs* are shown naked. In this depiction, the raised right foot covers the genital area. Interestingly, the approach to female nakedness contrasts with earlier examples shown at mKhar rtse mKhar rdzong (16th century, Western Tibet, Fig. 22), where the vulva is left visible.[21] This is also the case in the 15th-century murals of the Hevajra lHa khang at Gong dkar chos sde (see below Fig. 31; Jackson 1996: pl. 10).

All *ḍākinīs* are depicted with a single face, three eyes, a semi-wrathful expression with bared fangs, and yellow hair streaming upward; they are adorned with various ornaments—a crown of five human skulls and a necklace of fifty skulls and a collier in gold—and each hold their own distinct hand objects.

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[20] In images of seated deities, the *vajra* or *vajrāsana* posture means with the right leg folded over the left.

[21] In this 16th-century Western Tibetan "renaissance" artform, which draws on Kashmir-derived styles of the 12th–13th centuries, the typical semi-wrathful facial expression of *ḍākinī* is absent.

Beginning at the top (right side) and placed in a clockwise direction (Fig. 4: a–h) is west yellow Vetālī, her right hand holding a tortoise, left a skull cup; north-west multi-coloured Ḍombinī, her right hand holding a *vajra*, left a wrathful gesture; north green Ghasmarī, right hand holding a snake, left a skull-cup; north-east blue Pukkasī right hand holding a lion, left an axe; east black (here grey) Gaurī (right hand holding a curved knife, left a *rohita* fish?); south-east white Śabarī right hand holding a monk, left a monk's staff; south red Caurī right hand holding a *ḍamaru*, left a pig, and south-west purple (here grey coloured) Caṇḍālī right hand holding a wheel, left a plough.

Accomplished masters: the lineage of transmission

An important element to articulate the transmission of a tradition and to project legitimization is the lineage of tantric Buddhist teachings prominently depicted in the top row (Fig. 4: A–I, Fig. 9).

1. In the centre is positioned the Buddha Vajradhara (Fig. 9 and 10, Fig. 4: A), the primordial Buddha from whom the transmission of the teaching comes down. He personifies the adamantine, indestructible essence of the Dharmakāya, from which all Buddhas and deities



Fig. 9 – Hevajra thangka, lineage of transmission (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).

emanate. He is presented as a bodhisattva, richly adorned and ornamented, but seated in the classic meditational posture, on a lotus. He is blue, with one face and two hands crossed in front of his chest holding a *vajra* and bell in the gesture of union (*prajñā-liṅganābhinaya-mudrā*), thereby signifying the transcendence of dualistic distinctions and the attainment of supreme bliss (*mahāsukha*), the state identified with perfect enlightenment.[22]



Fig. 10 – Hevajra thangka, Vajradhara (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).

The portrayal of lineage masters—as shown in this thangka—upholding and transmitting the meditative techniques of the Lam 'bras appears to have been a custom from an early stage on. These masters ensured that each worthy disciple fully mastered the tradition and passed it on.

The following presents a preliminary identification of eight teachers, along with a tentative reconstruction of their chronological succession (see Fig. 4: A–I). The teachers in the first row (Fig. 9), to the right side of Vajradhara can be identified as:

2. (Fig. 11, Fig. 4: H) The lama prominently depicted to the right of Vajradhara represents the outstanding and influential Sakya hierarch dBang sdud snying po; he represents the last person in the lineage who can be identified. The teacher appears in a highly unusual form—riding a white snow lion, with his right arm raised as if in flight, conveying a sense of dynamic power. He wears a tall red hat and holds a *vajra* (thunderbolt) in his right hand and a *kapāla* (skull cup) in his left. The lion mount suggests an identification with dBang sdud snying po (c. 1763–1809). This eminent Sa skya hierarch, regarded as the 32nd patriarch of the 'Khon family, was venerated as the second Padmasambhava of this aeon and a renowned *gter ston* (discoverer of revealed treasures).[23] A particular manifestation of Padmasambhava is represented in a similar dynamic posture, holding a *vajra* and *kapāla*.[24]

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22 See a recent study on a magnificent 16th-century Vajradhara in bronze by Broeskamp (in press).

23 Cf. Watt 2012; see also Linrothe 2006: 374.

24 See HAR/items/30978 (last access 2 Dec. 2025).



Fig. 11 – Hevajra thangka, Sa skya hierarch dBang sdud snying po (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).



Fig. 12 – rDo rje Gro lod, form of Padmasambhava, Bhutan, 19th century (photo: https://www.himalayanart.org/items/99703).

Moreover, this association with Padmasambhava may allude to one of Guru Padmasambhava's wrathful manifestations—specifically rDo rje Gro lod;[25] he is standing upon a pregnant tigress associated with the subjugation of negative forces and the removal of obstacles (Fig. 12).[26]

3. (Fig. 13, right, Fig. 4: B) The next figure represents the famous Indian tantric yogin and *mahāsiddha* Virūpa (Tib. Bir wa pa, "The Ugly One", rNal 'byor dbang phyug, "Lord of Yoga"), who lived around the 9th/10th century in Bengal, north-eastern India.[27] There he received training in major Buddhist monasteries before abandoning monastic life to embrace that of a wandering tantric yogin, engaging in esoteric practices and spreading Vajrayāna teachings (Fermer 2024: 69). He was particularly revered for his exceptional wisdom and unconventional way of life. Virūpa, along with other Indian *mahāsiddhas* ("great accomplished ones", "great adepts"), came to be regarded as authoritative sources for particular Buddhist teachings in Tibet. Virūpa, also known as Yogindra ("Master of Yoga") is said to have received direct

[25] Bernadette Broeskamp, verbal communication. See also Treasuryoflives/Wangdu-Nyingpo (last access 2 Dec. 2025).

[26] See also HAR/website/items/13197 (last access 2 Dec. 2025).

[27] See on the history of tantric siddhas the seminal study by Linrothe 2006.

transmission of the *Hevajratantra* and experiential teachings from Vajra Nairātmyā. These scriptures are related to the teachings of the Lam 'bras (system for the interpretation of the Hevajra Tantra) representing the utmost tantric practice of the Sa skya pa (Fermer 2024: 25).[28]

Indian masters played a pivotal role, especially during the tenth to thirteenth centuries, when Tibetans were actively absorbing Buddhist traditions from India. The emergence of lineages of teachers and doctrines consistently traced their origins back to one or more Indian figures—many of whom were said to have received transmissions directly from Buddhist deities. Or, as Rob Linrothe has put it: "The mahāsiddhas act as the links between the deities who reveal the teachings and the Tibetan lamas who receive them" (Linrothe 2006: 286).



Fig. 13 – Hevajra thangka, upper border, left: teacher, right: mahāsiddha *Virūpa (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).*

Virūpa is corpulent and of darker colour; his attributes are a skull cup on a gold colour vase, flower garlands in the hair and around the body, a script in his hair-knot fastened with red ribbons. He sits on a white animal hide of antelope skin (see Linrothe 2006); in addition, an Indian-style large pillow supports his back. Closely related in terms of iconography is a Virūpa image in the Rubin Museum, 17th century, with Sa skya and Buddhist lineages (Watt 2003). See also a study by Jane Casey on a splendid early Virūpa depiction (Sa skya Monastery, Tibet; ca. 1216–1244, The Kronos Collections). She highlights his relation to Lam 'bras and the transmission of Lam 'bras teachings from the celestial deities Vajradhara and



Fig. 14 – Virūpa in charnel ground image, wall-painting, Protector Chapel, Gong dkar Chos sde Monastery, Central Tibet (after Fermer 2024: Fig. 90; photo: M. Fermer 2010).

[28] Watt 2003 defines the different forms of Virūpa; see also Watt 1999a. See also a recent publication by Giacomella Orofino (2025) who analyzes a work that articulates the foundational principles and techniques of a yoga system; it belongs to a corpus of texts preserved in the Tibetan canon.

Nairātmyā to Virūpa and explains, that Virūpa, is believed to have been instructed in the liberative teachings of the *Hevajratantra* by the deity Nairātmyā (Casey 2023).

In terms of iconography and also stylistically, the image is closely related to a splendid depiction of Virūpa as the lineage teacher of the Gong dkar Lam 'Bras, represented in a wall painting at Gong dkar rDo rje gdan; Fig. 14),[29] as will be discussed in detail below.

4. (Fig. 13, left, Fig. 4: F) The next teacher wears the same *paṇḍita* hat with upturned earflaps like the Sa skya patriarch dBang 'dus snying po, Fig. 11). Two lotus stems rise above his shoulders on which rest *vajra* and bell; his right hand is in *abhayamudrā*, while the left holds a characteristic jewel placed against his chest. He could thus be an abbot of the Ngor school, as the wish-fulfilling jewel (*cintāmaṇi*) in the left hand in their lap is indicative for this tradition.

5. (Fig. 15, Fig. 4: D) The teacher in the row below wears a red hat, both arms are down stretched, he is slightly corpulent with a round face; he is most likely the early master Dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan (1292–1361), who was born in the Dolpo region of present-day Nepal.[30]



Fig. 15 – Master Dol po pa Shes rab rgyal btsan(?) (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).

Teachers left side of Vajradhara (Fig. 16):

6. (Fig. 17, Fig. 4: I) The unidentified teacher to the left of Vajradhara has a red *paṇḍita* hat, holds a *kapāla* and *vajra* in the right hand before his chest.

7. (Fig. 18, Fig. 4: C) Sa chen Kun dga' snying po (1092–1158) is the next lineal teacher to the left; he is characterized by a halo of white hair, appears bareheaded, holds a lotus in one hand, while lowering the other in the *varadamudrā*. The great master Sa chen, also called the

[29] See also https://www.asianart.com/shalu/gongkar/06.html (last access 3 Dec. 2025).

[30] Many examples of this historical figures are published in the Himalayan Art Resources (HAR) website; see for example: HAR/Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen/81448 (last access 3 Dec. 2025). I wish to thank Bernadette Broeskamp and Tsering Drongshar for discussing with me the lineage images and for helpful suggestions towards the identification.



Fig. 16 – Hevajra thangka, teachers, right upper section, (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).



Fig. 17 – Hevajra thangks, teacher, right upper section, left of Vajradhara (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).



Fig. 18 – Hevajra thangka, Sa chen Kun dga' snying po (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).

"Great Compassionate One" (*brtse ba chen po*), was the son of 'Khon dKon mchog rgyal po (1034–1102), who founded Sa skya monastery in 1073 and who introduced Sa chen to Hevajra scriptures (Fermer 2024: 111).[31] He is regarded as the first to commit the oral instructions to writing and to disseminate Virūpa's highly esoteric teachings and he authored many works on Hevajra (Fermer 2024: 113). He is depicted in a similar manner, together with Virūpa and other teachers of the lineage, in the charnel ground murals at

[31] He was the first of the five Sa skya patriarchs, and the third throne-holder of Sakya Monastery. See also Stearns 2001: 133f.

Gong dkar rDo rje gdan (Fermer 2024: 111–113; fig. 91).

8. The teacher (Fig. 19, Fig. 4: E) to the left can tentatively be identified as Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po (1382–1456; *e waṃ pa chen po/ ngor chen rdo rje 'chang*), who established Ngor E waṃ chos ldan Monastery in 1430 (Tsering Drongshar, verbal communication); he is portrayed with red *paṇḍita* hat, holding two lotus stalks with flowers on which rest *vajra* and bell, and performing *dharmacakramudrā*. Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po is an exceptionally prolific scholar and is honoured by his tradition as "one of its 'Six Ornaments that Beautify the Snow Land [Tibet]'" (Heimbel 2017: XI). He was the founder of the Ngor subschool of the Sa skya order. Owing to his extensive writings, the teachings he imparted, his achievements as a practitioner, and the major monastic institution he founded, Kun dga' bzang po is counted among the most renowned Sa skya masters.[32]



Fig. 19 – Hevajra thangka, teacher's portrait, Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po (?) (1382–1456) (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).

9. (Fig. 20, Fig. 4: G) The register below appears to show the teacher Tshar chen Blo gsal rgya mtsho (1502–1566) with red *paṇḍita* hat, performing *dharmacakramudrā* (Fig. 20). He has no attributes but the black moustache and pointed beard is characteristic of this religious master. He is known for a number of writings such as his compositions on the Hevajra visualization (*nyi ma'i 'od zer*).[33]



Fig. 20 – Hevajra thangka, Tshar chen Blo gsal rgya mtsho (1502–1566) (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).

[32] See also Heimbel 2014, who investigated in detail the life of Kun dga' bzang po and his career as founder of the Ngor subschool of the Sa skya order.

[33] Tsering Drongshar, verbal communication. See https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.

Below the teachers, a deity is positioned on each side:

1. To the right of Hevajra (Fig. 21, Fig. 4: no. 2) is placed the deity Guhyasamāja Mañjuvajra (Tib. gSang ’dus ’jam pa'i rdo rje) with his consort (*śakti*) Sparśavajrā (Tib. Reg pa’i rdo rje). Seated in *yab-yum* posture, each deity has three heads and six arms, yellow body colour and a serene expression. His arms hold sword, bow and arrow, flower, and holding in front of him the consort with arms crossed at the chest in an esoteric gesture (*mudrā*) identifying supreme wisdom. Both figures have three heads and six arms holding their attributes: a sword (*khaḍga*), a bow (*dhanus*), an arrow (*bāṇa*), and a lotus (*padma*). His consort, Sparśavajrā, also has three heads and six hands and holds the same attributes.



Fig. 21 – Guhyasamāja Mañjuvajra (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).



Fig. 22 – Mañjuvajra, mKhar rtse mKhar rdzong cave temple, Western Tibet, 16th century (photo: Gu ge Tshe ring rgyal po, 2007).

Mañjuvajra is the esoteric form of the Bodhisattva of Wisdom Mañjuśrī, shown embracing his female consort in a sexual union (*yab-yum*). [34] The intimacy between the deities, in accordance with Vajrayāna Buddhism, is generally understood to represent the mystical union of forces necessary to overcome the false duality of the world of appearances in the striving toward spiritual Enlightenment. See a fine 16th-century depiction in the mKhar rtse

php?title=Tsarchen_Losal_Gyatso (last accessed 20 December 2025).

[34] In Tibet the *yab-yum* images are traditionally not intended for general use but are meant to be viewed only by those who have received proper instruction concerning their esoteric significance (https://www.britannica.com/topic/yab-yum, last accessed 1 December 2025).

mKhar rdzong cave temple, which also demonstrates the enduring nature of this iconographic form (Fig. 22).[35]

2. Left of Hevajra is seated Cakrasaṃvara in *yab-yum* form embracing his consort Vajravārāhī (Tib. rDo rje phag mo, "Diamond Sow") (Fig. 23, Fig. 4: no. 3). Śrī Cakrasaṃvara (Tib. 'Khor lo bde mchog, "Wheel of Supreme Bliss"), a specific Heruka deity, is the foremost tutelary deity of the "Wisdom (Mother)" classification of Anuttarayoga Tantra.[36]

He stands in a lunge, in an active posture, upon the lotus throne supported by two human figures, united with the goddess Vajravārāhī. In the *Sādhanamālā*, she is described as the first queen of the god Śrī Heruka (Bhattacharya 1958: 217).[37]



Fig. 23 – Hevajra thangka, Cakrasaṃvara (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).

Cakrasaṃvara has a body blue in color, with four faces and twelve arms. The main face is blue, the left green, the rear face red, and the right white. The facial expression is semi-wrathful. Each face displays three eyes, a gaping mouth, and four bared fangs. The first two hands hold a vajra and a bell (the bell may no longer be visible) and em-

35 See for an earlier comparison also an extremely fine Pāla-style miniature stele of Mañjuvara in the Cleveland Museum of Art, ca. 12th century; published in Huntington et. al. 2003: cat. no. 138, pp. 447–448.

36 For comparison see: HAR/Chakrasamvara/102263 (last accessed 3 Dec. 2025).

37 The book is an iconographic compendium mainly based on the *Sādhanamālā* and other cognate tantric texts of rituals. A *sādhana* is a ritual or meditative practice manual, often prescribing visualization (form, posture, attributes, color, ornaments, etc.), ritual elements such as *mantras, mudrās*, offerings, etc., for a specific deity and the purpose (accomplishment of *siddhis*, attainment of wisdom, liberation, protection, etc.).

brace the consort. The last pair of hands stretch out an elephant skin behind the body. On the right side, the third hand holds a *damaru* (hand drum), fourth an axe, fifth a trident, sixth a curved knife (*karttikā*). On the left side, the third hand holds a *khaṭvāṅga* staff marked with a *vajra*, fourth a *vajra* noose, fifth a skullcup filled with blood, sixth usually carries the four-faced head of Brahmā (now abraded). The hair is tied in a topknot at the crown of the head, and each face is adorned with a crown of five dry human skulls. Around the neck is a garland of fifty freshly severed heads, and the body is adorned with the traditional six bone ornaments. A tiger skin is worn as a lower garment. The right leg is extended and presses down on the breast of a white figure, traditionally identified as Kālarātri (usually red in color). The left leg is bent and presses on the head of another white figure, likely Yama, typically shown as black or dark.

Cakrasaṃvara's stance shows both legs stable on the ground with one leg bent and the other put forward. He lunges to left, thus representing *ālīḍha* stance, meaning "leaning to, or half-bent". The posture expresses dynamism, power and control and can be a particular attitude in shooting. The dynamic "Heroic Diagonal" or "Hunter's Stance" in which the deity lunges to the left (*ālīḍha*) or right (*pratyālīḍha*) is characteristic of fierce manifestations like Vajrapāṇi (Tib. Phyag na rdo rje, "Thunderbolt Wielder").

Among the oldest Tibetan Buddhist depictions of fully developed wrathful deities (*krodha*) in this posture, complete with specific fire-ring and coloring—a red half-circle, associated with powerful activities—can be found on the entrance wall of the Assembly Hall (*'du khang*), Main Temple (*gtsug lag khang*), of Tabo (11th century) (Fig. 24; see Bayerova, Kalantari, and Feiglstorfer, forthcoming).



Fig. 24 – Krodha, *wrathful deity, 11th century, Tabo* gtsug lag khang, 'du khang *(photo: C. Luczanits 1994/WHAV CL94 86 12).*

The term *pratyālīḍha* refers to a posture of Lord Śiva according to the Śivapurāṇa 2.5.10, "The burning of the Tripuras".

Vajravārahī is shown completely naked, has a pink to flesh-red colored body, one face, two hands, and three eyes (the sow's

head is not depicted or visible). Her left arm embraces the Lord, while the right arm is raised upward (holding an object, perhaps a *karttikā*, a ritual chopping blade, but the paint layer has deteriorated in this area). Her right leg is wrapped around the body of the male deity in intimate embrace, leaving no doubt about their sexual activity, symbolic of overcoming false duality.



Fig. 25 – Hevajra thangka, lowest register: ḍākinīs *and* dharmapālas *(photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).*

In the lowest register are shown protective deities (*dharmapāla*), standing or seated on their vehicles (Fig. 21, Fig. 4: nos. 4-8), which guard the assembly of gods and lineage masters above (Fig. 25).

1. At the bottom center is Pañjaranātha Mahākāla (Tib. Gur gyi mgon po, "Lord of the Tent") (Fig. 26, Fig. 4, Diagram no 4), who is the protector for the Śrī Hevajra cycle of tantras. He is shown with a corpulent body blue-black in colour, with one face and two hands holding a curved knife and skull cup with a magical wooden gong or 'gandi staff' (*gaṇḍī*, Tib. *'phrul gyi gan di)* placed horizontally across the forearms. His bent feet trample on a dead corpse; above the deity is a mythical creature, perhaps a *makara*.

Mahākāla is the most wrathful and the highest of all protectors (*dharmapāla*) of Tantric Buddhism, particularly revered as a Wisdom Protector—defending the practitioner and sacred teachings from inner and outer obstacles. However, he has also numerous rituals devoted to wrathful activity and destruction—notably of enemies and enemy armies. In thangka paintings, Mahākāla is often depicted at the lower border, symbolically guarding the entrance to the sacred space of the composition.[38]



Fig. 26 – Hevajra thangka, lower border: Pañjaranātha Mahākāla (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).

First of all, in this case, the prominent position and large size of Pañjaranātha Mahākāla is due to his specific role as the principal protector of the Śrī Hevajra cycle of Tantras and, most importantly, Pañjaranātha is the protective deity of the Sa skya school.

2. To the right of Pañjaranātha Mahākāla is shown Brahmarūpa Mahākāla (Tib. mGon po bram ze'i gzugs, "Having the Appearance of a Brahman") (Fig. 27, right, Fig. 4: no. 5).[39] He is appearing as an Indian Brahman, dark in colour, with one face and three eyes. The deity has a wrathful expression, and sits upon a human body lying on the lotus support. He has a white beard, eyebrows and long white hair tied together to a topknot and fastened with a bone, wearing a garland of freshly severed human heads, holding a *karttikā* in his right hand, and in his left a human skull filled with blood on which rests a vase in gold colour, from the latter a staff appears to emerge. At the edges of the pristine awareness wisdom fire four small naked figures around him extend their arms towards the deity. They are four *ḍākinīs*, grim in

[38] See also a Hevajra thangka with Mahākāla: HAR/Hevajra/53404 (last accessed 3 Dec. 2025). The iconography and rituals are found in the 18th chapter of the *Vajrapañjaratantra*, a Sanskrit language text from India, and an exclusive 'explanatory tantra' to the Hevajratantra itself. It is from the name of this tantra that this specific form of Mahākāla is known.

[39] See for comparison a Virūpa thangka with Brahmarūpa Mahākāla (and Pañjaranātha Mahākāla) in the bottom zone: Watt 2003/HAR/Virupa/352 (last accessed 3 Dec. 2025), 20th century (Rubin Museum, acc.# P1996.19.22).

appearance, dynamic in posture: Ḍombinī, Caṇḍālī, Rākṣasī, and Siṅgali/Siṃhalī Devī—black, red, yellow and green. They are naked with dishevelled orange hair, each holding a curved knife and a skull-cup.



Fig. 27 – Hevajra thangka, lower border, left: Sita Śadbhuja *Mahākāla, right: Brahmarūpa Mahākāla (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).*

3. Sita Ṣadbhuja Mahākāla (Tib. mGon po dkar po phyag drug pa, "The White Protector with Six Hands") is depicted in the left corner of the lowest register (Fig. 27, left, Fig. 4: no. 7). The White Six-Armed Mahākāla is a wealth deity of the Kriya class of tantras embodying abundance and majesty. He appears in a standing posture slightly bent to one side (*abhaṅga*). He is shown as a white, corpulent figure with six arms, one head with three glaring eyes, and gaping mouth with fangs. He is depicted trampling on two Gaṇeśa figures, each with gems held in their mouths. Held before his chest is a triple jewel (*triratna*), the Buddhist symbol of the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. In his right hands, he holds a drum (*damaru*) and a *vajra*, signifying power and ritual energy. In his left hands, a trident *(triśūla*) and—as characteristic attributes—*vajra* hook (*aṅkuśa*), and a blood-filled skull with a vase filled with jewels representing the protection and destruction of obstacles. He wears a skirt of rich red and blue brocade, tailored from precious cloth, underscoring his royal status. These elegant garments serve as symbols of prosperity and abundance.

At his feet are heaps of wool, silk, jewels, and stones, further emphasizing his association with wealth and material plenty.[40]

4. To the left of Pañjaranātha Mahākāla is the female protector Śrī Devī (Tib. dPal ldan lHa mo) (Fig. 28, left, Fig. 4: no. 6). She is a wrathful deity with one face and four arms. She holds a raised sword, a skull cup at her heart, a peg dagger, and a trident, and rides atop a mule. Śrī Devī is a fierce *dharmapāla* (protector of the dharma) and is revered as the principal female Wisdom Protector in Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhism.

5. To the left is represented Vaiśravaṇa, Guardian of the North (Fig. 28, right, Fig. 4: no. 8), riding a white lion, holds a jewel-spitting mongoose in one hand. Below him are heaps of treasures, symbolizing abundance and wealth, underlining his function to satisfy the economic needs of Tantric Buddhists.



Fig. 28 – Hevajra thangka, lower border, left: female protector Śrī Devī, right, Vaiśravaṇa, Guardian of the North (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).

Environment and charnel grounds

The work emphasizes these protective deities on a characteristic landscape background rich in individual scenes—including cemeteries and charnel grounds illustrating transformative power—in a unique way.

[40] See for an iconographic comparison an 18th-century thangka in the Rubin Museum: Watt 1998/HAR/Shadbhuja/351.

The deities, arranged in a rather planar, symmetrical, and mandalic composition, are at the same time embedded in a magnificent, finely rendered landscape. The landscape details occupy the lower two thirds of the composition, layered upward to form a richly textured terrain, while the upper section is devoted to the expansive depiction of the sky.

In the middle ground, enclosed by a backdrop of mountains, stretches a landscape animated with numerous small scenes shown in utmost detail (Fig. 29). Most strikingly, between lush trees, some of which are inhabited by mythical animals, appear charnel grounds and cemeteries (Skt. *śmaśāna*; Tib. *dur khrod*) which show drastic and cruel scenes of torture and death. In these areas, wolves, jackals, dogs, vultures, and other scavenging animals feed on human corpses, while meditating monks, charnel ground dwellers and yogis sit nearby, facing the remains in contemplation. In the lower left part for example a torture is visible in all details: a huddled figure, bound tightly by a strap, is being torn apart by two wolves, while on the other side, a person has been impaled, and jackals or wolves are already lying in wait. Some scenes symbolize the Tibetan practice of sky burial, in which the body is offered to birds. Elsewhere in the scene, flames near a stupa may indicate cremation rituals.



Fig. 29 – Hevajra thangka, ḍākinīs, *Indic gods and protectors, all in midst charnel grounds, right lower section (photo: C. Kalantari, 2024).*

Wrathful deities like the central deity of Hevajra—as well as Cakrasaṃvara[41] depicted on his left side and protectors such as Mahākāla, shown here as a guardian deity—are typically shown dancing or in warrior stance (*pratyalidha or alidha*) in cremation grounds. In mandalas related to Hevajra and Cakrasaṃvara and other tantric cycles, we often find eight cemetery goddesses (Aṣṭa-śmaśāna-devī / śmaśāna-yoginī) usually refer to a group of fierce *yoginīs* who guard the eight charnel grounds—one for each cardinal and intercardinal direction—, each associated with a charnel ground and stationed in the eight directions of the outer mandala.

In close historical, stylistic, and iconographic proximity, we find the practice of meditating in a charnel ground associated with several lineages, including the Gong dkar Lam 'bras tradition. In the wall painting of the protector chapel at Gong dkar rDo rje gdan (Fig. 14 and 31), teachers are depicted residing in such sites surrounded by scenes of horrific tortures and rendered with exceptional complexity. Also the charnel ground images on our Hevajra thangka show scenes of torture rendered with an astonishing degree of naturalism and inventiveness in their portrayal of terrifying martyrdoms.

In general cemeteries are not just physical places but symbolic landscapes of transformation, where yogis confront fear, ego, and impermanence. These spaces are inhabited by specific deities, spirits, and *ḍākinīs*.[42]

> "These charnel grounds also have physical locations in India [where yogins convened for lengthy periods of meditation] such as the Laughing charnel ground at Bodhgaya and the Cool Grove charnel ground close by, along with the Frightening charnel ground in the Black Hills of Bihar" (Watt 2001).[43]

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41 See Kossak and Singer 1998: 52.

42 For the depiction of charnel grounds see an extremely fine mandala of Hevajra (15th century, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Watt 2001/HAR/Mandala of Hevajra/87225): the outer circle, divided into eight sections, containing small figures and objects, is the ring of the eight great charnel grounds filled with corpses, fires, *stūpas*, *yogins* (for example, in the top centre of the ring is depicted Virūpa), *nāgas*, and wrathful worldly deities.
See also a Cakrasaṃvara mandala, Central Tibet (Kossak and Singer 1998: 52); therein the various cremation ground scenes are shown with utmost complexity, and full of horrible tortures.

43 A description of the charnel grounds in the *Hevajratantra* literature (authored by dKon mchog lhun sgrub, 1497–1557, written in 1551) has been published online by Watt 2001/HAR/items/87225, last accessed 1 December 2025): "'In the east is the Gruesome charnel ground (chandograkatasi); south Frightful with Skulls (bhairavakapalika); west Adorned with a Blazing Garland (jvalamalalankara); north Dense Jungle (girigahvaronnati); north-east Fiercely Resounding (ugropanyasa); south-east Forest of the Lord (ishvaravana); south-west Dark and

As seen in our image, the main Indic gods (Fig. 25 and 29) can also be related to cemeteries. According to one system of the Tantric Buddhist classification of Anuttarayoga, they are the Eight Direction Gods of the Cemeteries (Watt 2010).[44]

In the left and right lower part can be identified: 1. Indra/Śakra, king of the devas in the Vedic tradition, is shown seated on a white elephant holding a *vajra* (see also Fig. 2), 2. Yama, god of death and the underworld in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, on a blue buffalo holding a stick (*ibid*.), 3. Yakṣa holding mongoose and sitting on a horse, and 4. a *makara* is the vehicle of Varuṇa; 5. east Īśāna on a bull (Fig. 29), 6. south-east Agni on a goat, 7. south-west Rākṣasa on a zombie (Fig. 7), 8. north-west Vāyu on a deer.

Furthermore, the main Indic gods are shown under the feet of Hevajra, but also in the unified environment showing another aspect of the integration and adaption of culturally recognized and popular forms.

Stylistic conventions and artistic context: A new relation between gods, humans and nature

This thangka is a work of exceptional quality, distinguished by its intricate detail and the use of costly pigments. Its subtle line work and rich colour palette, enhanced with touches of gold, reveal the hand of an experienced painter. Although some areas show minor flaking, the image remains clear and visually coherent.

The painting is characterized by the highly vivid execution of the central tantric deities and their dynamic movement; in its colour palette red and blue predominate, and the subtly shaded contours lend the figures a certain corporeality. The circles of light and flames surrounding the main deities are rendered with soft gradients that transition from rose to deep red. A light-toned mountain landscape occupies the lower two-thirds of the composition, dominated by a turquoise-green hue and blue in which the atmosphere is subtly suggested. Above, the sky is rendered with a delicate gradation from light blue to deeper shades of the same tone, within which

Terrible (bhairavandhakara); north-west Resounding with the Cries Kili Kili (Kilikilaghoshanadita). Furthermore, there are headless corpses, hanging corpses, lying corpses, stake-impaled corpses, heads, skeletons, jackals, crows, owls, vultures, and zombies making the sound, "phaim". There are also siddha[s] with clear understanding, yaksha, raksha, preta, flesh eaters, lunatics, bhairava, daka, dakini, ponds, fires, stupa, and sadhaka. All of these fill the charnel grounds.'"

[44] Watt 2010/HAR/Mandala of Hevajra/59875 (last accessed 4 Dec. 2025) describes these gods in a Sa skya Hevajra thangka (16th century).

complementing deities and teachers dwell, hovering amid the clouds. The confident brushwork and refined execution are complemented by abundant decorative motifs and natural elements, many of which become apparent only upon close inspection.

Along the contours of the idealized mountains, delicate rows of vegetation unfold. Stylized trees and other elements of flora and fauna populate the mountain slopes, while cloud formations in between create a subtle sense of depth and atmosphere. The careful attention to naturalistic detail reflects a distinct approach to the art of landscape and portraiture, revealing Chinese stylistic idioms reinterpreted through Central Tibetan artistic conventions.

The fundamental innovation of this Tibetan artistic tradition lies in the integration of the main deity—the *ḍākinīs* and the gods around—into the landscape itself. While the composition remains vertically structured, the overlapping of various mountains, bodies of water, and open spaces creates a certain sense of a unified landscape, in which the figures move—rather than a mere assemblage of separate elements of nature placed between them.

One source of inspiration can be seen in a distinctive approach to landscape painting in China that can be traced back at least to the Song dynasty (960–1279). This genre, particularly of the Ming period (1368–1644),[45] is characterized by wide panoramas with steep, often mist-shrouded mountains (rendered in contrasting colours, frequently blue and green) rising in successive planes, interspersed with auspicious



Fig. 30 – Journey to Shu, Ming painting blue and green style, traditionally attributed to Qiu Ying 仇英 (ca. 1494–1552) Accession no. F1993.4, Smithsonian, Museum of Asian Art, Purchase—funds provided by the B.Y. Lam Foundation Fund, http://n2t.net/ark:/65665/ye35329fcb4-eb41-40b1-bda6-e9a33fef4325.

swirling "*lingzhi*"-shaped] clouds, clusters of trees, pavilions, and inhabited by human figures (Fig. 30). Subtle gradations of tone evoke an atmospheric perspective, together conveying an ideal, utopian world.

For the art-historical contextualization of this painting tradition, a specific artform, the "mKhyen ris style", a term used in Tibetan definitions of religious painting traditions, emerges as particularly significant (Jackson 1996: 142ff.). This visual idiom ultimately derived from one of the foremost Tibetan master artists active in fifteenth-century Central Tibet. This trend reflects a profound engagement with the refined aesthetics of Chinese dynastic portraiture and landscape painting with a new interest in human–nature relationship.

One notable example for comparative analysis is the magnificent mKhyen ris-style wall painting featuring Hevajra on the first floor of the Gong dkar chos sde Temple executed by the famous painter mKhyen brtse chen mo (Fig. 31). Taking the temporal distance into consideration, commonalities include the dynamic depiction of the divine figures displaying delicate shading along their contours; further we find a comparable approach to nature and landscape: in both examples the lotus base rests upon a massive rock formation, embedded within a mountainous landscape, executed as characteristic



Fig. 31 – Hevajra, wall-painting, Hevajra Chapel, Gong dkar Chos sde Monastery; ca. 1464–1476; by Khyentse Chenmo (photo: D. Jackson, 1986, after Jackson 1996: pl. 10).

green and blue rock formations, and studded with clouds. All this reflects a naturalistic sensibility that resonates with Chinese landscape painting.[46] The Chinese relationship to nature and their sense of harmony, expressed through realized landscape gardens, led to the development of a sophisticated and rich genre of landscape painting,[47] whereas the Tibetans—accustomed to a harsher climate and arid terrain—depicted idealized settings that they expected to find only in Buddhist paradise; these images rather signify withdrawal from the worldly realm—and an ideal paradisical landscape for meditation.

The significant artistic innovation of the highly influential Gong dkar chos sde wall paintings lies in the fact that, for the first time, the deities are embedded within a landscape. It is perhaps no accident that the *ḍākinīs*, depicted in lively and life-like postures, overlap the halo of the main deity and are shown without nimbuses—thus emphasizing their real presence and movement within their surroundings.

A specific feature of the originality of this style is the space around the main deity that incorporated Chinese-style elements like trees, stylized rocks, and cloud motifs, which were adapted to Tibetan ideas and aesthetic preferences: energized multi-colored, hyper-realistic mountainscapes created of stylized rocks in contrasting colours like pink, green and blue, full of details of humans, shown with their physical characteristics, and naturalistic, lively portrayed creatures such as birds and wild animals, etc. As Fermer has noted: "[…] it is almost as if inanimate objects have come to live in the divine aura of the master. Penpa Wangdu describes this vivid quality in the depiction as 'surpassing real life' (*'tsho ba dngos las 'phags*) and 'possess(ing) a nature even stronger than real life'" (Fermer 2024: 51–52).[48]

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[46] For analysis of Sino-Tibetan interrelations, see Linrothe 2004. See also Broeskamp (in press) on the integrations of Chinese pictorial elements in 14th-century artworks.

[47] In China, the well-ordered imperial park, or palace garden can also be interpreted as a metaphor of the well-regulated state. Blue and green landscape compositions were also used for Daoist paradises (Linrothe 2004: 36).
Chinese landscape painting also significantly influenced Persian art, particularly during the 14th and 15th centuries under the Mongol Ilkhanid dynasty when active diplomatic and trade relations were maintained by sea between the Timurid and Ming courts (Rossabi 1973; 1976: 28). Persian artists adopted and adapted Chinese landscape motifs into their own cultural context. For an example see a manuscript illumination depicting "Prophet Muhammad Receiving First Revelation", c. 1425 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; see metmuseum/collection//451418, last accessed on 4 Nov. 2025).

[48] Tsechang Penba Wangdu gives a short summary with excellent images in his online-article: Tsechang Penba Wangdu 2023/rubinmuseum/essays/murals-of-gongkar-chode).

Interestingly, a similar development can be observed in 16th-century Europe, where, as a new feature, nature attained an independent status in the painting of the "Danube School" in Austria and Bavaria. Leading figures such as Albrecht Altdorfer (Fig. 32) emphasized the animation and spiritual vitality of nature, using 'hyperrealistic' landscape elements, dramatic clouds and atmosphere to underscore the emotional tenor of their religious works. Although the landscape is inspired by Italian examples and the horizon is much lower, in both examples, humans are for the first time depicted as individuals within their environment, which is depicted and understood as a real, physical space rather than an abstract (planar) metaphysical, transcendent, atemporal realm.

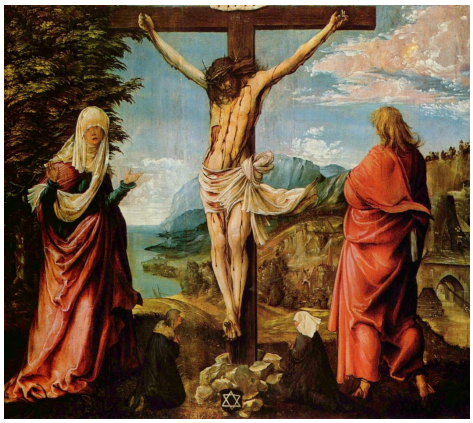


Fig. 32 – Christ on the Cross with Maria and John; painter: Albrecht Altdorfer, ca. 1512, oil-painting on wood, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister Kassel; https://altemeister.museum-kassel.de/32026/.

Not only are individual figures, flora and fauna characterized in detail by the master artist mKhyen brtse chen mo, but naturalism is also created on the level of material mimesis and the illusionistic depictions of luxury items and silks with almost tactile qualities: the halo is beautifully ornate, reminiscent of intricately carved wooden ornamentation in which silk brocade is stretched as a backdrop for the figure. The pedestal is rendered as fine Chinese silk with woven motifs of curling dragons, typical of luxury textiles. I have shown elsewhere that material mimesis is not only decorative; it has multiple layers of social, religious and ritual meanings. For example, in Tibet, from early on, artful imitations of costly textiles in various media have been intended to commemorate and guarantee the merit of lay patrons. The donation of textiles to the Buddhist community was, and continues to be, regarded as one of the most meritorious acts, believed to yield the highest spiritual benefit to the donor and it motivated the transfer into other media.[49] This tradition of artful illusion of luxury items shaped aesthetics and contributed to the enormous rich visual culture in Tibet.

[49] See a study by Satomy Hiyama (2018) on a ceremony of donating textiles, the *kaṭhina* ceremony, held annually after the conclusion of the "Rainy Retreat" season.

A comparable approach towards material culture and interactions with Ming art can be found at roughly the same time beginning in the 16th century in Western Tibet, first analyzed in a brilliant study by Khokhlov and Laurent (2020). See also images of the mKhar rdzong cave temple at mKhar rtse, Fig. 22).

Another mKhyen ris-style example is an image of the *mahāsiddha* Virūpa in the Protector's Chapel, Gong dkar chos sde (Fig. 14). Its naturalism with regard to lively movement and a kind of physiognomic individuality, seeks to evoke the feeling that the figure is truly present and that the viewer can enter into an emotional relationship with it.

According to tradition, this major central Tibetan artistic tradition of the mKhyen ris (also known as mKhyen lugs) painting style was established in the 15th century by the prominent painter mKhyen brtse chen mo, as mentioned, and his followers at Gong dkar chos sde Monastery.[50] The monastery, located about sixty kilometres south of Lhasa, was founded in 1464 by rDo rje gdan pa Kun dga' rNam rgyal (Gong dkar rDo rje gdan pa, 1432–1496).[51]

The mKhyen ris style with its major master mKhyen brtse chen mo represents one of the most sophisticated artistic achievements in Tibetan history and in world art. He has been described as a "revolutionary artist of Tibet" in the 2016 publication by David P. Jackson and Mathias Fermer. Moreover, Fermer (2024: 51) characterizes the style, particularly in his recent study focusing on teacher portraits within this artistic lineage, and underlines the

[50] Various authors described the mKyen ris style as inspired by the Chinese painting tradition (Fermer 2024: 51; Jackson & Fermer 2016). Surviving examples of the art in this style are mainly concentrated in the Gong dkar region, and highlights are found at the Gong dkar chos sde Monastery, Gong dkar County, lHo kha, dBus region, Central Tibet (present-day TAR, China). A comprehensive chronology has not yet been established due to the lack of securely dated works. Furthermore, the definition of art styles, their evolutionary history and development of later stylistic affiliations are still a desideratum of future research.

[51] Gardner 2024 summarizes: "Based on later accounts of the monastery, Fermer, Losal Dondup, and Jampal Gawa identify several surviving murals at Gongar Chode [Gong dkar chos sde] as having been done by Khyentse Chenmo. These include a large Buddha and retinu[e] in the inner sanctuary (*gtsang khang*), murals of the 108 episodes of the previous lives of the Buddha from the *Avadānakalpalatā* on the outer walls of the assembly hall, a Vajrabhairava statue in the Bhairava Chapel, the walls of the Hevajra Chapel and the Upper Protector Chapel (*mgon khang steng ma*) in the second floor, and the walls of the Vajradhātu Chapel on the third floor. He also created larger-than-life clay statues of Lamdre lineage masters for the Guru Chapel on the fourth floor. They also consider it likely that Khyentse Chenmo and his nephew created the images of the Sakya founders and Lamdre master on the on the entrance walls to the inner sanctum."

inspiration by Chinese painting traditions.[52] Tibetan artists clearly adopted Chinese stylistic elements and topics—such as depictions of natural features and animals—and incorporated them into Tibetan painting. In a description of Khyentse's artistic background Gardner (2024) postulates, that he likely studied examples of such works, which were commissioned by Yuan and Ming emperors and presented to Tibetan hierarchs at major religious centres, including Gyantse.[53]

A new aspect of this style is the remarkably individualized features, which I would describe as an 'expressiveness' in teacher portraits that actively engages the viewer. For the latter a Hevajra thangka in mKhyen ris-style is characteristic (Fig. 33). The lineage masters have—



Fig. 33 – Hevajra thangka, mKhyen ris style, private collection, 17th century (HAR item no. 6140, https://www.himalayanart.org/items/61401).

[52] Fermer 2024 studied depictions of Lam 'bras masters in the mKhyen lugs (or mKhyen ris) art style and their historical context.

[53] See LoBue and Ricca 1993.

within the typical iconographic parameters including posture, gesture, robes — characteristic physical features and are shown in different lively movements. As described by Fermer (2024: 53) the portraits achieve a new level of naturalism, showing characteristic physical features, facial expression characterising the emotions and mental states. "This makes it possible to identify teachers of a lineage through comparison and the chronological logic underlying the arrangement of figures, even without inscriptional evidence" (*ibid*.).

In the context of a teacher's portrait of dBang sdud snying po Rob Linrothe (2006: 374) writes: " …later Tibetans were still alive to the mahāsiddhas and in their inner meditative life 'became' them so intently that materialized portraits […] were deemed appropriate".

Concerning the physical features of the Aufschnaiter-thangka, the naturalistic approach to portraiture, characteristic of mKhyen ris wall paintings and thangkas, is much less pronounced. However, although the lineage masters are depicted in a hieratic, rather schematic and stiff manner—flat and almost stencil-like—their faces nevertheless display certain individualised, portrait-like features that imbue them with a sense of liveliness. This form of *selective naturalism*, as I would term it, evident in the treatment of facial features, details of flora and fauna, as well as in representations of material culture such as costly textiles, is a distinctive characteristic of this artwork.

Chronological classification

The image draws on a long stylistic lineage through its adherence to established iconography, motifs, love of details, and compositional strategies. This continuity of artistic vocabulary underscores the essential need to preserve and transmit tradition in order to assert continuity and reinforce religious legitimacy. Nevertheless, a close analysis of its artistic features clearly identifies the work as a product of a specific period.

Close stylistic parallels may be seen in several 19th century works, crafted in a Sa skya context, further supporting a 19th century dating of the Aufschnaiter scroll paining. A Hevajra thangka, 19th century with Sa skya and Ngor lineage depictions, in the Southern Alleghenies Museum of Art allows for meaningful iconographic comparison (see Watt 1999b/HAR/Hevajra/90531). Hevajra as main deity is also depicted in a Sa skya-related piece in the Museum der Kulturen, Basel, 18th century (Watt 2017/HAR/Hevajra/3314471).

A meaningful comparison is a Hevajra Thangka (but according to the lineage of Damarupa), 19th century, from the Shechen Archives (Watt 2008/HAR/Hevajra/102267), however, the latter is more

naturalistic, the faces display higher degree of individuality and nature details are more nuanced using a very fine brush. Thus, a dating to the second part of the 19th century for our piece is proposed.

A *terminus post quem* is also indicated by the lineage teacher depicted seated beside the primordial Buddha Vajradhara: the eminent Sa skya *bla ma* dBang sdud snying po (c. 1763–1806). Regarded as a *gter ston* ("treasure revealer"), he is shown seated on a lion—a visual allusion to his status as the "second Padmasambhava" of his aeon.

Conclusion

This exceptional thangka depicts the tantric meditational deity Hevajra with his consort Nairātmyā, shown amid a large assembly of gods and presided over by a lineage of transmission. It represents the Lam 'bras ("Path and Result") system, a major tantric tradition within Tibetan Buddhism. Lam 'bras became the central tantric teaching of the Sa skya school, integrating rigorous intellectual training with the experiential cultivation of advanced meditative practices.

The fine, vibrant image draws on a rich treasure of iconographic forms and detailed motifs of nature and fauna, the lively execution of the principal deities, and individual, 'expressive' character of historic figures derived from the renowned mKhyen ris art-style, a tradition established in the 15th century in Central Tibet and itself inspired in many ways by the aesthetics of Chinese court art. Through these trans-cultural adaptations, an extraordinarily rich visual culture emerged—one whose influence radiates well into the modern era. Its creation, datable on stylistic evidence and based on the identification of historical figures, to the beginning to mid-19th century is plausible.

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