

THE RUBIN LOOKING GUIDE

MUSEUM OF ART

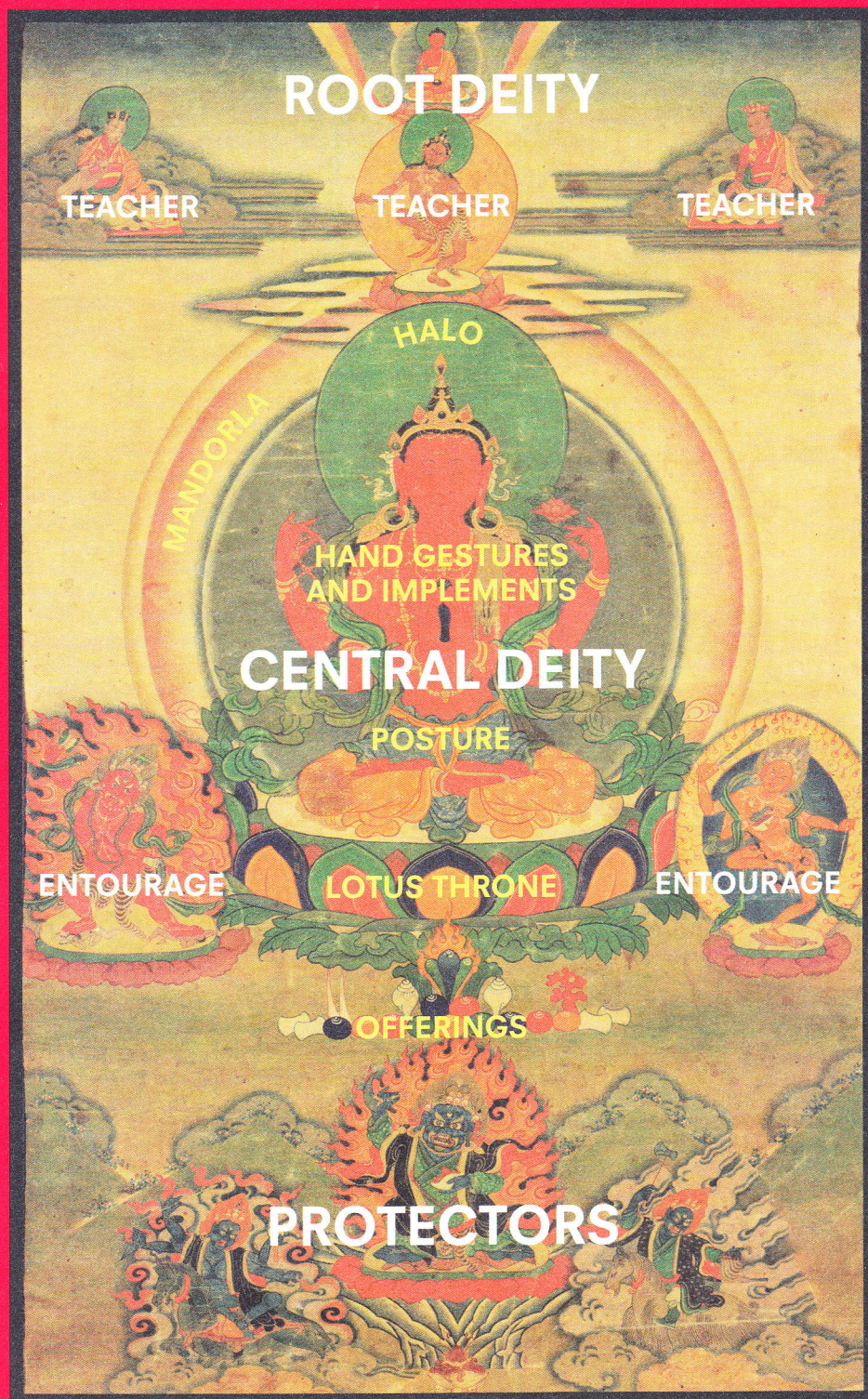


Use this guide to help you recognize common symbols and important figures as you explore the Museum's galleries.

The figures and symbols featured in this guide are only the beginning. After your museum visit, go to rubinmuseum.org for more information about the art of the Himalayas.

THE RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 WEST 17TH STREET
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10011
RUBINMUSEUM.ORG

COMPOSITION AND STRUCTURE OF A PAINTING



Avalokiteshvara
Eastern Tibet; 19th century
Pigments on cloth
12 x 19 1/2 in.
C2006.66.359 (HAR 790)

FIGURES



BUDDHAS

Buddhas, or “enlightened 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 awakened beings 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 serve as protectors of Buddhist teachings.



TANTRIC DEITIES

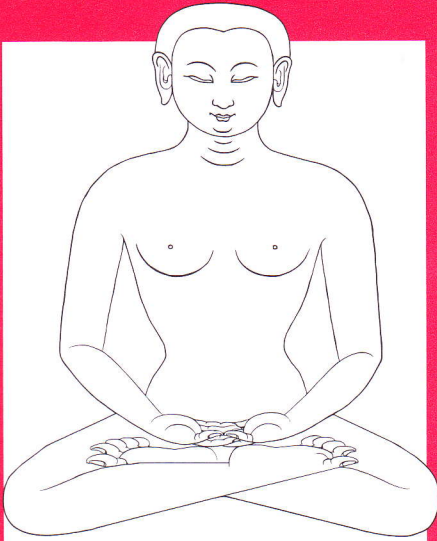
Numerous forms of deities are described in religious texts called tantras. These deities personify various enlightened qualities and can have many heads, arms, and legs, which symbolize their many abilities.



FEMALE DEITIES

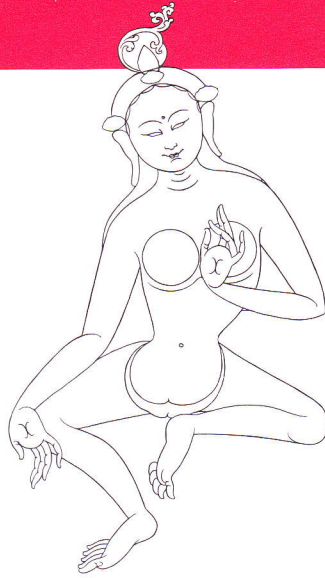
Bodhisattvas and tantric deities can be depicted in female form. Just like their male counterparts they embody enlightened qualities and can be both peaceful and wrathful in appearance.

POSTURES



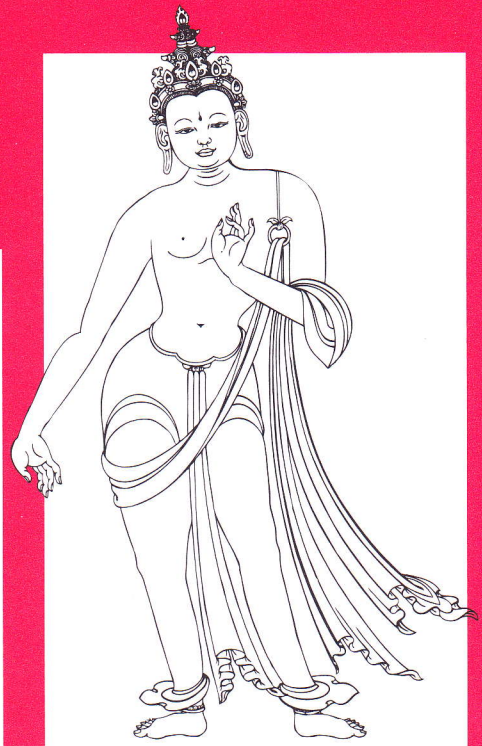
LOTUS

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.

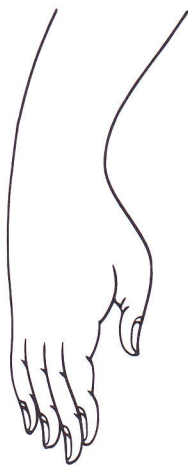


ARCHER/HUNTER'S STANCE



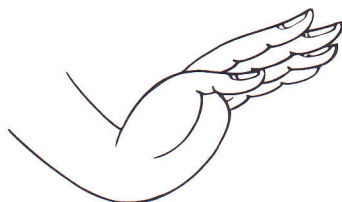
DANCING

GESTURES



TOUCHING THE EARTH

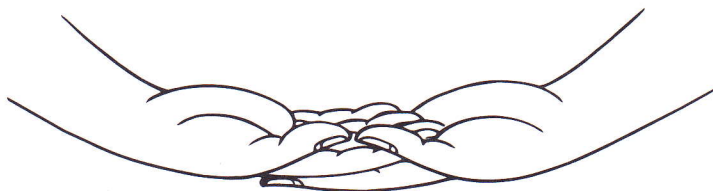
This is the gesture of the Buddha calling the earth to witness his enlightenment.



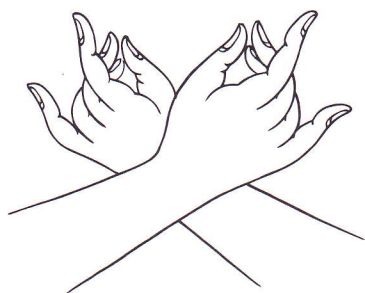
DO NOT FEAR (PROTECTION)



PRAYER (REVERENCE)

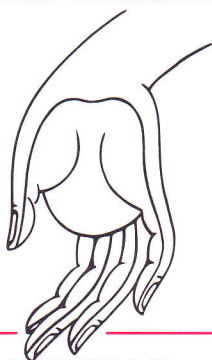


CONTEMPLATION



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

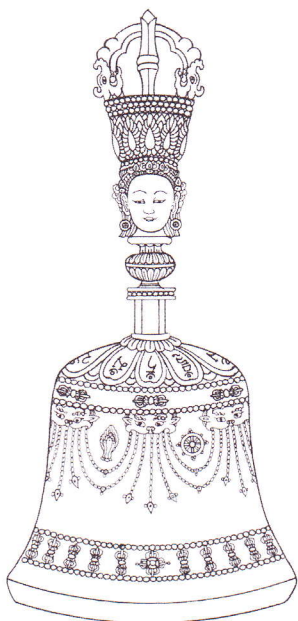
The right hand is extended in a giving gesture.



TEACHING

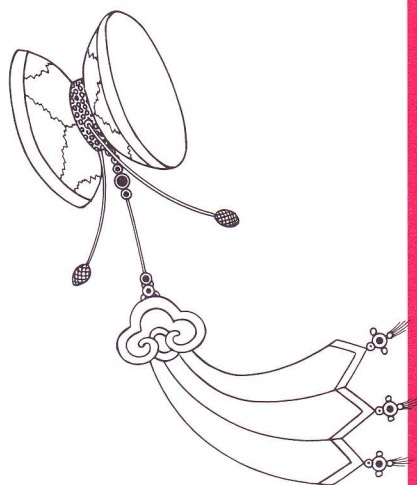
The hands form the shape of a wheel, symbolizing the "turning of the wheel of dharma," a reference to teaching the Buddha's doctrine.

IMPLEMENTS



BELL

A bell is often paired with the *vajra* and is used in tantric practices. It is also 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.



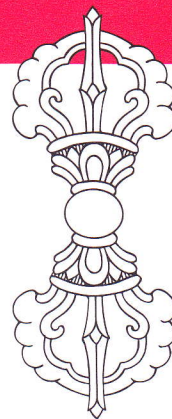
HAND DRUM

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.



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.



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.

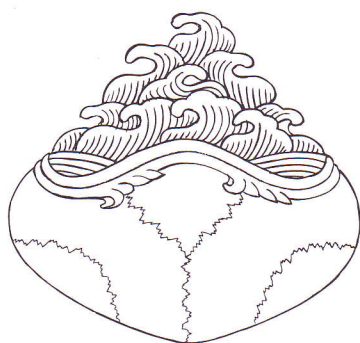
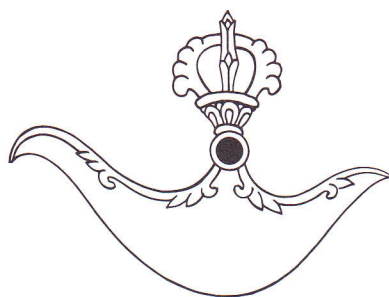


THREE-BLADED DAGGER

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.

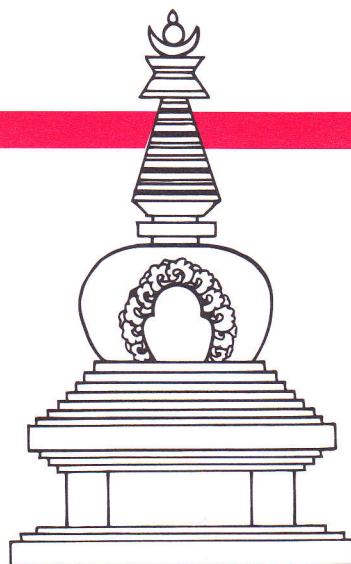
CURVED KNIFE

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.



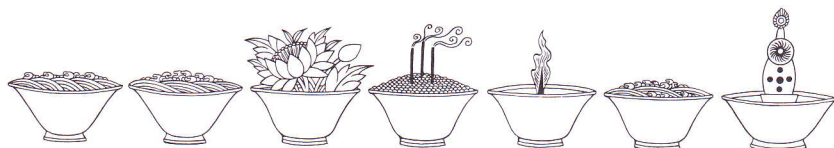
STUPA

Stupas were originally burial mounds housing relics of the Buddha. They symbolize the "mind of the buddha" attained at complete enlightenment.



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.



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.